

【Practical report】

Implementing and Managing a Unified English Curriculum at Gifu University

Onno van 't Hof

Organization for Promotion of Higher Education and Student Support, Gifu University

Abstract

This paper describes the implementation and management of a unified English curriculum (UEC) at Gifu University. It outlines the situation before the UEC was implemented, the conditions in which the UEC was established, and the role that the English Center and its members currently play. It describes how the quality of the UEC is maintained through teacher training, materials development, and standardized assessments.

Key words: Implementation, Management, Unified, English curriculum

What is the Unified English Curriculum (UEC)?

The Unified English Curriculum at Gifu University consists of four English courses that are required for all students of the five faculties at Gifu University (Applied Biological Sciences, Education, Engineering, Medicine, Regional Studies). There are also two intensive courses for students who fail the regular classes.

The “Unified” element means that all students in one course follow the same 15-week schedule, study the same material, take the same final exam at the end of each course, and are graded using exactly the same grading criteria regardless of which faculty they belong to, who their teacher is, or during which semester or year they take the course.

Every student has to take four one-semester courses—English 1 (Speaking), English 2 (Listening), English 3 (Reading), and English 4 (Writing). The term UEC is used in this paper to refer to these classes as a whole.

During the summer and spring breaks, there is a four-day intensive course period for students who have taken but failed one of the regular classes. Each intensive course is followed

by the same standard exam as in the regular course. Because all students have studied the same material during the regular course, teachers of the intensive courses are able to focus on the students' weak points, and, because of the reduced number of students in each class, give extra assistance to those students who need it. Students who retake the course will study the same material regardless of when they take it or who their teacher is.

A major advantage of the UEC from an administrative point of view is that if an instructor cannot teach a class, whether as a result of a planned absence or an unexpected event such as illness, the class does not need to be cancelled. When a teacher is not able to teach, the supervisors assign all the students to another class that takes place at the same time. Since all classes in one course are following the same curriculum, students can smoothly join a different class with a different teacher.

The Situation Before the UEC

Before April 2018 the English instructors at Gifu University were free to choose their own textbook and create their own 15-week curriculum. This resulted in a great deal of variation in content, level, workload for the students, and grading standards and methods. Students were not given the option to choose either their instructor, the course, or the curriculum, but were assigned to a group by the administrators. This resulted in inequality between the different groups and generated many complaints from students, particularly regarding workload and grading criteria. At this time, there were about 25 part-time teachers, most of whom were not aware of what other teachers were teaching. Accordingly, most did not know what their students had or had not studied in previous semesters, or what they might be going to study in the future.

The UEC in Numbers

The UEC was first implemented in April 2018 and has been running for three consecutive years. In 2020 there were 83 90-minute classes per week during the first semester and 77 classes during the second semester that followed the new curriculum. (Some full-time faculty members elected not to adopt the new system.)

The students are divided into 42 groups based on their faculty & department: Applied Biological Science (6), Education (9), Engineering (16), Medicine (4), Nursing (3), Regional Studies (4)). Most groups have between 25 and 30 students, with a total of about 2000 students participating each semester in the four courses combined. The groups and teachers are organized in such a way that each group will have a different teacher for each of the four courses.

In 2020, the teaching staff consisted of five full-time and eight part-time English teachers from 9 different nationalities, teaching between eight and sixteen 15-week courses per year each.

Implementing the Unified English Curriculum

Instrumental to the successful implementation of the UEC was the establishment of the English Center (EC). The EC is both an organization within Gifu University as well as a physical place.

The English Center – Organization

The EC as an organization consists of one director, two supervisors, three full-time instructors, and, in 2020, eight part-time instructors. The responsibilities and tasks of these members are as follows:

The Director of the EC

The director of the EC has overall responsibility for its management and operation. Although the daily management is in the hands of the two supervisors (see below), the director is responsible for long-term policy making concerning the curriculum, personnel, finances and other EC activities. Any communication with the university management goes through the director. He stays up to date with the EC's activities through almost daily visits and weekly management meetings with the two supervisors. He also has a position as a full-time member of the faculty of education.

Supervisors

The two supervisors are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the English Center, managing all the full-time and part-time instructors. It is their job to ensure that educational quality and standards are maintained. They also teach six to eight 15-week UEC courses per semester, one of the selective advanced courses, and the twice-yearly intensive courses. Besides that, they take turns being the coordinator for one of the courses and manage other activities of the EC, such as English Xtra and the Summer Camp (see *other EC activities* below). The supervisors hold weekly management meetings with the director, and monthly team meetings with the three full-time instructors. They also organize the class observations of all teachers.

The supervisors are a crucial layer between the full-time and part-time instructors and the General Education office staff. One reason for this is that Japanese proficiency is not a requirement for either full- or part-time instructors, and nor is English communication ability a requirement for the office staff. A high level of Japanese language ability is therefore required for any non-Japanese supervisors, since a lot of the communication between the office staff and English teachers goes through these supervisors. Through this cooperation, it is possible to avoid miscommunication and reduce the workload of the office staff.

The supervisors have their own offices, but spend most of their time at the EC, allowing short and direct lines of communication between management, full- and part-time instructors, and General Education office staff.

Full-Time Instructors

Besides teaching their eight 15-week UEC courses per semester, each of the three full-time instructors is the coordinator for one of the four UEC courses. (One of the supervisors coordinates the remaining fourth course). As coordinators, they are the first access point for the part-time teachers for information about the course, the textbook, and the tests, and they also prepare and manage any special activities that are part of the course. Full-time instructors have this responsibility for one year, and then switch, so that over time, all three full-time instructors learn the details of each of the four courses. Together with the supervisors they teach the intensive courses and take turns in teaching one of the selective advanced courses. They also participate in other activities, including English Xtra and the Summer Camp (see *other EC activities* below).

Part-Time Instructors

The eight part-time instructors teach between four and eight 15-week courses per semester. Every teacher teaches each of the four UEC courses at least once a year, and therefore becomes familiar with the entire curriculum. As a result, the teachers know what students have learned in previous semester(s) and what they will learn in subsequent courses.

Other EC Activities

Besides the UEC, the English Center offers four selective advanced courses, English Xtra (30-minute English consultation sessions with one to four students, faculty and office staff), and a Summer Camp, which is offered as a three-day English-only “homestay”-experience for about 50 students. These activities are not part of the UEC, and therefore are not covered in this paper.

The English Center – Physical Place

The English Center is not just an organizational structure, but also a physical place. It is a room located in an easily accessible and central location near the main entrance on the first floor of the General Education building. The room is equipped with three workstations for the full-time instructors, a big table suitable for meetings, a counter that seats four people (used for English Xtra), a casual seating area, and lockers for all the teachers.

Having a staff of two supervisors and three full-time instructors means that the English Center is always occupied (except when all teachers are teaching at the same time), and therefore can function as a convenient access point for students for information about English education.

It is also the place where all teachers gather before and after class, and in this way, it plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between supervisors and teachers, and also communication among the teachers themselves. Having all the teachers in one place before and after class makes it very easy to communicate last-minute changes and make announcements about special activities. Since most of the teachers teach the same material on the same day, it also creates an environment in which it is easy and natural for teachers to share feedback on how the classes they just taught went, talk about difficulties they might have had, and share ideas about how to enhance certain activities.

The EC is also a good environment for teachers to provide direct, informal feedback about the teaching materials. Since all the teachers, including the supervisors, teach the same classes and courses, everybody is familiar with the material. This makes the moments immediately after class a great opportunity for the supervisors to get feedback on what went well during class, what was problematic, and where there might be room for improvement. Sometimes, activities and exercises that did not go well can be improved easily by the supervisor or course coordinator giving the teacher advice or additional instructions. Sometimes, however, this feedback can result in changes being made to either the curriculum, the textbooks, or both. (See *Material Development - Textbooks* below).

Managing the Unified English Curriculum

In 2020, the thirteen full-time and part-time teachers were from 9 different nationalities with a wide variety of professional backgrounds and experience. To assure that each teacher delivers the same high quality of education to every student, it is not sufficient simply to assign textbooks to courses and ask the teachers to get on with it. To continuously maintain standards and make sure that all teachers, regardless of their background or experience, are able to provide a high level of education to their students, the EC focuses in particular on three things:

1. Teacher Development
2. Materials Development
3. Standardized Assessment

Teacher Development

To make sure all teachers deliver the same unified curriculum, the teachers need to be prepared (pre-sessional planning), assisted during class (through teaching guides and class observations), and given the opportunity to evaluate and be evaluated (feedback sessions and class observations).

Pre-sessional planning

The aim of the UEC is not only that teachers teach the same content, but also that they take a similar approach to implementing the materials. Having uniformly structured classes not only makes it easier to maintain the quality of the education and spot irregularities, but it also offers a number of practical advantages. For example, students can easily join another class in case of an absent teacher, because each class not only covers the same material but is taught in a similar way. To help teachers to reach the goals of the UEC, the English Center has developed teacher manuals, supplementary materials, and guidelines for each of the courses.

Teacher manuals

Each of the four courses has, besides a textbook, an extensive teacher manual. The manuals explain in detail what the focus of each (part of the) unit is meant to be, the purpose and method of the activities, and suggestions for additional activities. This ensures that even when a teacher is not completely familiar with a topic, all the students in all the classes will learn about it in the same way and receive the same level of education.

Guidelines

Whereas the teacher manuals aim for uniformity in approaches to teaching the textbook, the guidelines aim for uniformity in the teachers' dealings with students. The EC has developed two sets of guidelines: guidelines for students, and guidelines for teachers on how to organize each class.

The guidelines for students aim to ensure that all teachers treat their students the same way. For example, the guidelines explain that just attending does not guarantee a passing grade, that participation in pair and group work is expected, how many absences are allowed, and how tardiness and absences should be handled.

The second set of guidelines, the guidelines for teachers, are meant to create uniformity in how teachers prepare their students for the midterm and final tests, as well as uniformity in class structure. The guidelines include suggestions to teachers on how to organize each class, and range from minute-to-minute timelines for new or inexperienced teachers to supplementary activities and extension exercises for teachers who feel that their students need to be challenged a little more.

Teaching Support

To assist each teacher, the English Center has developed Keynote/PowerPoint slide presentations that remove the need for extensive preparation on the part of individual teachers. This is important as many of the teachers are part-time and therefore have very busy schedules. There is also an organized a system of observations to help teachers develop their teaching and maintain the standards of the UEC.

Keynotes/PowerPoint presentations

For each of the 15 classes in all four courses, a Keynote/PowerPoint presentation is available to all the teachers. The presentations cover all the elements of a unit, highlight the most important parts, show the answers for all the activities, and add extra information and supplementary activities. The presentations complement the explanations provided by the teacher with an important visual element, thereby enhancing the overall experience of the students. For the teachers, the presentations reduce preparation time and increase teaching efficiency, leaving them with more time to assist individuals who need help. Since all the teachers use the Keynote/PowerPoint presentations, they are an important tool in ensuring quality control.

The slide presentations use the same style, layout, and easily recognizable procedures for all four UEC courses, which shows the students not only the cohesion between the courses, but also the unified way of teaching of the different instructors of each course.

Class Observations

Each semester, one or both of the supervisors observe at least one class of each of the teachers. These observations are followed by a feedback session. The following week, the observed teacher takes the role of the observer and watches a class taught by one of the supervisors, again followed by a feedback session.

One of the goals of these class observations is to develop the skills of the teachers. Observing a class is a valuable tool to help teachers to learn from each other, and observations are valuable not only for the teacher being observed, but also for the teacher or teachers doing the observation. Through taking the role of an observer and stepping back instead of teaching the class, it is easier to become aware of any elements of material that may require further development. Observations are also one of the best ways to make sure that all classes meet the same standard and that all students are prepared for the tests in the same way.

Regular Feedback Sessions

The goals of the feedback sessions are the development of the teachers and the development of the materials. (See *Materials development* below). During the feedback sessions

the full-time staff of the EC and available part-time teachers discuss the classes of the past week, going through each of the four courses looking at what parts of the textbook and class went well and what did not, exchanging ideas how to make activities better, or suggesting activities that could be added to improve the class. Not all part-time teachers are able to join the weekly feedback sessions, but the ones who can't regularly use the opportunity to exchange ideas and give informal feedback to the course coordinators or supervisors when they are in the English Center immediately after they teach their classes.

Materials Development - Textbooks

When deciding the content for each of the four courses the following conditions were taken into consideration (among others):

1. The material had to be new for the majority of the students (i.e., different from what they learned in high school).
2. The material had to fit in a curriculum of fifteen 90-minute classes for each of the four courses.
3. The materials had to be presented in a way that every instructor would be able to teach all of the four courses.

During the first year of the UEC, the lesson materials for the four courses consisted of copied handouts. In the weeks before each class, the director and the five full-time members of the EC would gather several times a week to discuss the content of each of the units. The resulting pilot unit would then be copied for all students and taught by all teachers. After the classes were taught, all the full-time teachers and available part-time teachers would gather once a week for a feedback session to talk about how the classes went and discuss changes that needed to be made to each unit.

During the second year of the UEC, every week of classes was followed by a feedback session with the teachers to make final changes to each unit.

Since April 2020, the start of the third year of the UEC, there has been a textbook for each of the four UEC courses. The textbooks were made using the previously piloted materials. The plan is to revise the textbooks every two/three years under the supervision of the English Center.

Standardized Assessment

Another crucial part of managing the UEC is the standardized assessment. Three key aspects of the standardized assessment are uniform tests, collaboration, and communication.

Uniform Tests

Each of the four UEC courses has a final exam, with the speaking and writing course also having midterm exams. Each course exam is the same and is graded using the same criteria for all students, regardless of their teacher, their faculty, their year, or whether it is a regular or an intensive course. This has led to a huge change in the grades awarded for English classes. In 2017, before the establishment of the UEC, only 2% of students failed, and 49% were awarded an A or S grade. In 2018, 11% of students failed, and only 20% were given A or S grades. Concerns that a uniform test for all students might not be challenging enough for the ones regarded as being of a higher level turned out to be unfounded, with 8% of medical students failing, and only 24% getting A or S grades.

Collaboration

To make all the assessments as fair and transparent as possible, all teachers collaborate, although the level of collaboration varies depending on the course. Occasionally, teachers work together and mix the students in their classes so that students have an opportunity to practice with different partners during pair- and groupwork. For the final test for the English 1 Speaking course, teachers do not test or grade their own students. Instead, the students are tested and graded by another teacher who teaches the same course at the same time. The speaking test is video-recorded, and the recordings are randomly checked by the full-time staff of the EC to check that the grading criteria have been applied correctly. Failing grades for any of the four UEC courses are checked by two additional teachers.

Communication

The third aspect of standardized assessment is clearly explaining to all students and teachers what the procedures and content of the tests are, and how the tests are graded. Both the reading and the listening course textbooks have practice tests in the back of the book, so students can see what is expected of them. The test procedures and grading rubrics for the speaking and writing courses are explained in detail in the textbooks.

Evaluation of the UEC

The introduction of the Unified English Curriculum has completely changed the English education for the students and the teachers at Gifu University. For students, major positive changes are the clear cohesion between the four courses, the sense of fairness considering all students experience the same workload, difficulty of classes and assessments, and the perception that the English education at Gifu University is a well-rounded program. For the teachers

substantial improvements are the feeling of being part of a team that works together towards the same goals, having a prepared and tested curriculum, and having clarity of the targets of the total English program at Gifu University. This more than makes up for the fact that some teachers might feel a loss of freedom of being able to create their own curriculum and choose their own textbooks. In the years to come the goal of the English Center is to continue developing all aspects of the curriculum and for even better outcomes.

UEC and Online Education During Covid-19

The transformation from in-class education to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic does not fall under the scope of this paper. The fairly smooth and successful implementation of the Online Unified English Curriculum at Gifu University will be described in a future publication.