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**Practical Research Reports**

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**Liberal Arts, TOEFL, and First-Year English Curriculum Reform: A Project in Progress**

Paul WADDEN<sup>1)</sup>\*, Sakae ONODA<sup>2)</sup>, Marcel VAN AMELSVOORT<sup>3)</sup>

**【Abstract】**

This Practical Research Report describes the comprehensive reform of a first-year English program at a Japanese university. In brief, it presents the background for the reform, steps taken so far, difficulties encountered, some preliminary results, and challenges remaining. Drawing upon a unified curriculum and 4-koma-a-week sustained contact, the English program at University A is implementing a CLIL (Content-and-Language-Integrated Learning) curriculum based on the liberal arts. As students build their academic reading and listening skills, they acquire basic knowledge in Sociology, Economics, Earth Science, Health and Medicine, Zoology, and Natural History. Because the TOEFL test used to measure progress is largely based upon materials from first- and second-year liberal arts courses, some knowledge of these areas is essential for achieving that benchmark. A preliminary 2021 pilot using this approach in three experimental classes resulted in a 24-point score gain as compared to a 14.6-gain for 12 other control group classes. To support development of their academic language skills, students also engage in general English vocabulary study, extensive reading, and TOEFL-related grammar pattern learning. The curriculum reform is an action-based research study with potential implications for other university English programs as well.

**Key words:** English for Liberal Arts, CLIL, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), First-Year English, Japan higher education

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**調査・実践報告**

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**リベラルアーツ、TOEFL、初年次英語カリキュラム改革について**

ポール ワーデン<sup>1)\*</sup>, 小野田 榮<sup>2)</sup>, マルセル ヴァン アメルズフォート<sup>3)</sup>

**【要 旨】**

本実践研究報告は、日本のある大学（A 大学）の国際教養学部の初年次英語プログラムにおける研究・カリキュラム開発プロジェクトについて述べたもので、全面的な改革の背景、これまでの歩み、困難だった課題、予備的な成果、残された課題などを簡潔にまとめた。A 大学の英語プログラムでは、統一カリキュラムと週 4 コマの授業をもとに、リベラルアーツに基づく CLIL (Content-and-Language-Integrated Learning) カリキュラムを導入している。学生がアカデミックな読解力とリスニング力を身につけながら、社会学、経済学、地球科学、健康・医学、動物学、博物学の基礎知識を習得することが目的である。

2021 年に予備調査として、3 クラスを対象にリベラルアーツの分野を題材とする教材を用いて CLIL の授業を行った。その結果、この 3 クラスの学生の TOEFL の平均点は 24 点上昇した一方で、統制群である他の 12 クラスの平均点は 14.6 点の上昇にとどまった。また、同プログラムではアカデミックな言語能力の開発をサポートするために、一般的な英語の語彙、多読、TOEFL 関連の文法も学習している。このカリキュラム改革は、アクション・リサーチ研究であり、他の大学の英語プログラムにも示唆を与える可能性があると考えられる。

**キーワード:** リベラル・アーツの英語、CLIL (内容言語統合型学習)、EAP (留学準備英語)、1 年生の英語、日本の高等教育

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<sup>1)</sup> Faculty of International Liberal Arts, Juntendo University (E-mail: wadden@juntendo.ac.jp)

<sup>2)</sup> Faculty of International Liberal Arts, Juntendo University (E-mail: s-onoda@juntendo.ac.jp)

<sup>3)</sup> Faculty of International Liberal Arts, Juntendo University (E-mail: amelsvoort@juntendo.ac.jp)

\* Corresponding author: Paul WADDEN

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Big Picture

This Practical Research Report explains the background for an extensive reform of a first-year university English program in a faculty of liberal arts, the steps taken so far in the creation of the new curriculum, the difficulties encountered, some preliminary results, and challenges remaining. One feature of the reform is that it is “a natural experiment” that tests “a novel hypothesis with potentially significant results” (Wadden et al. “Addressing Japan’s international TOEFL ranking, 2021, p. 6). In addition, it should be noted that the curricular and instructional challenges faced by faculty and students in University A are not unique to the university but common to many universities across the country. As an action-based research project, therefore, the reform can potentially create a path which other universities can also follow. Describing the reform-in-progress—its context, justification, challenges, and preliminary results—is the principal purpose of this report.

Wadden (2021) sets forth in detail the backdrop, rationale, and intended outcomes for the reform of the English program that is the subject of the current intervention. He explains that for the past 20 years Japan has recorded among the lowest average TOEFL®<sup>1</sup> scores in Asia. For example, in 2019, the last year for which reliable data from ETS (Educational Testing Service, the maker of the TOEFL) is available, Japan’s average score on the TOEFL iBT was the third lowest of 35 Asian nations (ETS, 2020). This low performance is particularly mystifying given the country’s status as a developed country with considerable “economic resources at Japan’s disposal” (Underwood and Glasgow, 2019, p. 156) and its high level of achievement in math, science, and literacy demonstrated on international standards such as the OECD Pisa exams (Statista, 2022) in which during some periods Japanese high

school students have impressively scored between 1st and 3rd in the world.<sup>2</sup> Among the traditional explanations for such low TOEFL scores are that Japan’s secondary education focuses excessively on grammar (Snyder, 2019); that a larger percentage of Japanese take the TOEFL than in other countries, pulling down the national average; and that other Asian nations that were colonized by English-speaking countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, have an unfair linguistic advantage (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019; Reedy, 2000; Takeno & Moritoshi, 2018). However, these explanations tend to ignore the out-performance in English achievement of other Northeast Asian countries such as South Korea and China, which like Japan were also not historically ruled over by English-speaking colonial governments, and which have traditionally tended to draw on audio-lingual and grammar-based instruction in English education rather than communicative-based approaches.

Sim and Kim (2016) discuss content-based and CLIL instruction in Korea, citing studies that suggest it is more effective than traditional language-focused instruction. Yet, as they note, CLIL is still far from widespread. Moreover, the CLIL or content-based pedagogy they cite that is focused on “local culture” does little to address the knowledge needs of students attempting to demonstrate their proficiency on international tests such as the TOEFL. In contrast to Sim and Kim, “Liberal Arts, First-Year English, and TOEFL” suggests that a particular *type* of content- or CLIL-instruction is needed, and posits that one of the causes of Japan’s long standing low TOEFL performance is possibly that high school and university English courses often have an excessive focus on language skills, communicative English, and test-taking practice without coherent and comprehensive liberal arts content and the associated vocabulary (Wadden, 2021).

An inescapable reality, however, is that the

TOEFL ITP—in contrast to widely used high school and university English texts—is mainly based upon students’ ability to comprehend traditional liberal arts content in reading passages and short academic lectures (and also to a lesser extent the ability to identify grammar errors and understand campus-related conversations). As the executive director of TOEFL at ETS observes, “Most items that you will encounter on a TOEFL test tend to be drawn directly from university-level textbooks, from the courses that students would typically encounter in *a first- or second-year liberal arts class*” (emphasis added) (Gopal as quoted in Moody, 2020). The ETS website itself explicitly states that the TOEFL ITP reading test, the form of the test most widely used by universities in Japan, is “designed to measure the ability to read and understand short passages similar in topic and style to those read in courses taught at North American universities and colleges” (Educational Testing Service, 2020). A review of 10 TOEFL ITP tests by Wadden, Hilke & Matsutani (2001) observed the breakdown outlined below of the contents of reading passages.

It appears that one of the principal reasons why Japanese students—who in math, science, and native language literacy perform toward the top of global standards—lag behind in English achievement as

measured by academic tests such as the TOEFL is that high school curricula and university programs do not develop vocabulary and basic knowledge in the liberal arts fields noted below but rather concentrate mainly upon incidental vocabulary, grammar, and test-taking practice in random textbook units with a tendency to view content learning—along with associated terminology—as something to be done in the L1, not the L2 (Saito, 2013).

Overall, the low average performance of Japanese students on the TOEFL suggests several negative outcomes. First, individual students have difficulty in content-based and EMI courses. As Brown and Bradford observe, “most students entering EMI need better input skills, especially increased reading speed and better lecture comprehension” (2019, p. 107). Next, the deficiencies implied by low test performance suggest a difficulty in meeting nationwide government goals for better English proficiency. As Brown and Bradford observe in their work on CLIL and EMI courses in the Japanese university: “government policies and market forces are aligning to encourage more classes taught in English. The Japanese government is now financially supporting EMI initiatives through grants to a number of universities, first with the Global 30 Project, then

Table 1. TOEFL topics by frequency (percentage of appearance)

38%	Natural Science [Zoology, Health and Medicine, Geology, Astronomy etc.]
32 %	History [Canadian and US history, Literature, Art, Music]
16 %	Biography [History, Scientists, Musicians, Writers]
12 %	Social Science [Sociology, Social Psychology, Economics, etc.]
2 %	General Interest
0 %	Non-North American* [No Japan-related topics]
0 %	Religion
0 %	Newspaper articles

(Wadden, Hilke & Matsutani, 2001, p. 10)

\*Note: Passages relating to Britain and European/Near East history now sometimes appear. Japanese studies-related passages remain at 0%.

with the Go Global Japan Project, and more recently with the Top Global University Project. The adoption of EMI in Japanese universities follows the worldwide trend toward internationalizing higher education.” (2019, p. 104) Finally, in a global economy in which English is—fair or not—the principal language of commerce, having employees with advanced reading and listening skills is imperative for companies and countries. Studying abroad in formal programs or more informally, and engaging in collaboration or work across countries is an increasingly common part of that. Various tests are deployed to measure general English skills, including TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS, often without sufficient regard for the original purpose of the test, and only giving stakeholders a rough idea of proficiency. As the *Harvard Business Review* notes, “Like it or not, English is the global language of business. Today 1.75 billion people speak English at a useful level… and [m]ore and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language—Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, SAP, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few—in an attempt to facilitate communication and performance across geographically diverse functions and business endeavors. (Neeley, 2012, p. 1) For all of these reasons, Japan’s low TOEFL performance—and its cause—is cause for concern.

## 1.2. The Immediate Backdrop

Underwood and Glasgow (2019) describe the context of university English instruction in the following way:

There is no formal continuity between high school and university curricula stipulated by MEXT, so university instruction does not begin where high school courses end. In general, freshman students are required to take 90 hours

of English in total to graduate (equivalent to two 90-minute classes a week for two semesters of 15 weeks each), though many universities require English study during sophomore year, too and offer further electives for juniors and seniors. (p. 154)

The vast majority of Japanese university courses have a one class, once-a-week format in which an individual professor teaches a single class—a koma—for 90 minutes. Under administrative guidance from the Ministry of Education, the university school year is made up of two terms, each 14-15 weeks in length, so an individual professor will choose course materials and teach a semester- or year-long course with 14 to 30 class meetings. This is also one of the reasons why language courses at the university level are relatively ineffective. As any language learner knows, once-a-week study of a foreign language is insufficient to make significant progress. By contrast, the English instruction in the program in question at University A consists of four 90-minute classes per week. Two partner teachers, one non-Japanese and one Japanese, co-teach this 4-koma weekly sequence using shared materials. Overall, the curriculum is ‘unified’ so that all 240 students—in ideal-sized classes of about 15—study the same materials and are evaluated in the same way with some adjustment for course level. Lesson plans, course materials, and evaluation are also coordinated, making it superior in organization and sustained contact than first-year English programs at many other Japanese universities.

Nevertheless, prior to the current reform, the first-year English program shared some of the same curricular characteristics of more typical programs despite 4 koma a week of study. Although large differences emerged between classes, on average students only gained about 14 points on the TOEFL ITP on the post-test after 160 instructional contact

hours. A likely explanation for this relatively modest gain is that the text chosen for the course did not extensively focus on the reading and listening skills as measured by the TOEFL ITP. Since choice of course materials is crucial for learning outcomes and poses a key decision for every language program, this progress report examines it in detail.

During 2021-22, the main course material selected was a major publisher's monolingual commercial EFL textbook. This textbook purposely focuses on only two skills: reading and writing. A companion volume focuses on listening and speaking, but the consensus among English teachers was that there were not enough instructional hours for both books to be used. The selected course textbook offered the students at all English skill levels—from low to medium to high—the following materials.

- About 15-16 pages of reading for the entire year, with no readings longer than a single page. Each chapter contained two brief readings on the topic, which were studied over a three-week period of 12 classes (as the reading teacher covered grammar, vocabulary, and some writing activities as well). While many of these passages contained important academic discourse patterns, with just two multi-paragraph readings per topic the students were not required to read widely enough or deeply enough in any subject to gain much fundamental knowledge of it. This reduced their exposure to important content vocabulary and concepts, which are significant features of an academic reading program.
- Only 21 minutes of dedicated classroom listening materials for the entire year (about 4 minutes a month during 24 hours of class time). These 21 minutes consisted mainly of British news-feature TV broadcasts. Not only was this inadequate in amount, but the content produced for news TV was only marginally related to academic study. (To compensate for this, a

TOEFL ITP listening book was assigned for use over the summer and fall months leading up to the test.) As with reading, the main textbook's content did not form a coherent and comprehensive intervention. It featured little listening decoding training, and an insufficient focus on academic vocabulary. As a result, students did not have sufficient opportunity to improve their academic listening ability in preparation for the 1/3rd of the TOEFL based on listening.

- About 200 general vocabulary highlighted in textbook passages and featured in exercises (coordinators and individual teachers did select and teach additional words not highlighted in the text). Since the book was not content-based, it did not systematically present vocabulary to build knowledge in particular liberal arts areas. This meant that first-year students were unable to build a strong foundation in academic vocabulary beyond the modest number of academic terms that appeared in the readings.
- Grammar lessons that focused on a limited number of important grammar points, teaching them through examples. It is believed that some students, used to careful explanations of grammar in Japanese, may have found these lessons in an English-only textbook difficult.
- Writing exercises that focused on important discourse patterns. While writing is indeed important, and can lead to the reinforcement of learned content, the TOEFL ITP does not have a writing section, and many teachers seem to have taught writing in a communicative manner, focusing on student output of their own ideas rather than using writing to deepen comprehension of the listening and reading content.
- No TOEFL-like comprehension questions for reading or listening and no TOEFL-related grammar instruction were featured in the text.

As a result, students perhaps did not gain sufficient familiarity with the kinds of questions that appear on the TOEFL ITP test. Individual teachers did introduce sample structure and reading passages to help students with test preparation, but these materials were not integrated with the content of the core instructional materials. It should be noted that while the focus of a liberal arts-based CLIL curriculum is not specifically test-preparation training, it is helpful for students to be familiar with the types of reading and listening comprehension questions on the TOEFL to learn to identify main ideas, supporting ideas, inferences, important facts, and other such information in readings or lectures. It should also be acknowledged that a particular TOEFL score (or IELTS, TEAP, or EIKEN score) does not guarantee that a student can successfully complete courses in English—in Japan or abroad—because many other skills and abilities are also needed for successful study and course completion. However, such scores do tend to indicate the minimal language competence in reading and listening to successfully complete such coursework in English.

The overriding shortcoming of the curriculum was that its textbook featured general topics such as globalization, architecture, energy, and aging, but none of these topics was covered comprehensively enough as the focus was not on the learning of important concepts or associated vocabulary, but rather general language forms. In each of the eight lessons, the one brief video and the two one-page reading passages connected to a general topic but did not focus on or develop knowledge of a particular academic subject. Therefore, even if the materials matched the students' level and the quality of the teaching was high, in their four 90-minute classes a week over the 30 weeks of the school year

first-year students built very little academic understanding in any liberal arts area. This general English textbook approach of using umbrella topics but lacking sustained engagement with liberal arts knowledge areas is common to the curricula of universities throughout Japan (and to high schools as well). The central idea underlying the current intervention and reform is the need to provide students with the basic knowledge, vocabulary, and schema for the traditional fields of the liberal arts. An important aspect of that is the development of customized materials by departments and programs (Wadden, 2021).

## 2. Methods

The liberal arts modules now being developed as texts function as materials for a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) curriculum, which as described by Smit and Dafouz means, “Learners are engaged in a joint learning practice of subject matter and foreign language” (2012, p. 1).<sup>3</sup> As students learn English, they also acquire basic knowledge in fields such as Sociology, Economics, Earth Science, Health and Medicine, Zoology, Natural History, and other areas. Having some knowledge of these areas, as explained above, is essential for scoring higher on the TOEFL ITP and for readiness to take university courses in English either in Japan or abroad. It should be pointed out that a CLIL-based curriculum is not necessarily the same as an “immersion program.” In an immersion program, the target language is used all the time whereas in a CLIL-based curriculum the learner's first language (L1) may be used to support students' learning. For example, there may be translation of key texts to confirm student's understanding, and some instruction such as grammar and vocabulary may be conducted in L1 to aid learning.

For the spring term of 2022, a mini-module in Education and three full-length modules in

Sociology, Economics, and Earth Science were prepared, and for the fall term Health and Medicine, Zoology and Animal Studies, and Natural History. They were composed in two levels: a standard level with a larger number of reading and listening passages that deal with a wider range of topics within each discipline, and a basic level with fewer passages on a narrower range of topics, and with controlled vocabulary and language structures (more on this differentiation below). Each module contains 3-8 reading passages, 5-12 brief academic lectures and TED Talks, 60-80 subject-specific vocabulary items, 80-200 general academic vocabulary items, and reading and listening comprehension questions to provide TOEFL-like practice.

The standard modules are organized in the following way, though teachers have the freedom to alter the sequence, introduce activities to provide more scaffolding, and emphasize reading or listening depending upon their division of labor with their partner teacher.

1. An initial activity activates interest and existing knowledge through writing and discussion questions.
2. Subject-specific (and other academic) vocabulary is introduced. Students keep and update vocabulary notebooks to deepen knowledge and connections with vocabulary.
3. Reading passages are introduced. These focus on the liberal arts content, progressing from providing an overview of the field to passages dealing with specific conceptual content. The purpose is primarily to build lexical and schematic knowledge in the field. In order to teach and promote the use of reading strategies, passages are given to students before they are covered in class. Students are required to read through the passage, annotating it by highlighting key sections, underlining confusing or unknown parts, and summarizing sections (Groen, et. al.,

2021). The practice of annotation helps students to develop multiple reading strategies, and learn key concepts on their own first, reducing their dependency on the teacher for making sense of content.

4. Japanese translations of two reading passages are provided, after students have made an initial effort to understand the content, in order to help students to confirm their understanding.
5. Listening activities make use of short lectures and online content with video support. Students are taught and trained in note taking. Note-taking tasks require students to comprehend and organize content to reinforce concepts and build listening skills. Many of the note-taking tasks require students to graphically organize content, which helps them to learn and remember important concepts and language (Jiang, 2012).
6. Short-answer tests are used to assess content acquisition. This helps to shift student attention from language to content, as they know they will be responsible for learning concepts.
7. A variety of other activities such as ‘before and after’ knowledge checks, and focused discussion and activities are interspersed with other tasks.

In addition to liberal arts contents, the curriculum includes the following:

- For 2022, a comprehensive vocabulary program called the Global Academic Vocabulary (GAV) program was introduced. The program features 23 lessons on the 1,750 words most commonly used across academic fields. The program offers bilingual “definition” flashcards in English and Japanese as well as “exercise” flashcards and writing-listening-spelling activities, self-quizzes, and autonomous and competitive vocabulary learning games. The vocabulary program is hosted on the Quizlet (2022) site and

students can work on sub-lists autonomously. In addition, teachers draw from 23 Google forms tests (about 750 test questions in total) to assess learning, along with pre- and post-tests to measure student's progress. In principle, these will eventually be used across all classes to motivate students and to assess their vocabulary learning in a unified curriculum. In addition, the vocabulary that appears in the module readings and lectures is systematically introduced as well as common field-specific vocabulary related to particular fields in the liberal arts. Students annotate this vocabulary in their module booklets and record them in the previously mentioned personal vocabulary-learning notebooks.

- Xreading, an online extensive reading system, provides opportunities for developing reading fluency across a wide variety of levels. Students are required to read from 50,000 to 110,000 words a term depending on their class level. Students engage in self-selected extensive reading with expectations for the volume of reading. In addition, particular books thematically related to the liberal arts modules are regularly assigned. These allow students to see target vocabulary in a new context as they develop their reading fluency and hopefully expand their vocabularies. Assigned books, which represent roughly 30-50% of total reading on the system, reinforce the concepts students are learning in the modules while at the same time building their reading skills, increasing their reading speed, and reinforcing the general and subject-specific vocabulary they are encountering. Speaking and writing activities are conducted in class to encourage students to see those connections and to productively make use of the language they encounter.
- Some academic- and campus-related

conversations like those on the TOEFL are also included in the modules; students read these aloud in pairs and make recordings of them. In future years, campus-related conversations and vocabulary will be expanded.

- In previous years, there were no common tests across first-year classes except for the TOEFL ITP. In 2022 first-year English is adopting some common tests—such as short-answer written tests on key concepts in liberal arts fields being studied—that will be used across all classes. In the future, it is hoped that program-wide tests can be regularly administered to assess content learning and to motivate and assess students' grammar and vocabulary study.

Lower-level classes, which constitute roughly half of the classes, take a somewhat modified approach. Passages are edited to remove overly confusing language while maintaining their conceptual content. In addition, target vocabulary and concepts are amplified (Walqui & van Lier, 2010). This means that items are carefully introduced and sufficiently repeated in passages. In addition to content vocabulary, a wider range of academic and general vocabulary is also targeted, with a particular focus on formulaic language that is common in academic discourse (Durrant, 2018). Modules begin with concept checks and schema activation, but then include a lecture-based listening training exercise to introduce a particular discourse feature (language of cause and effect; ways of providing lecture overviews; adverbial clauses of time and other time-related discourse markers; etc.). This is done to make salient certain discourse features, and also to preview some key vocabulary, facilitating the significant amount of repetition of vocabulary necessary for learning (Pellicer-Sanchez, Siyanova-Chanturia, & Parente, 2022; Webb & Nation, 2017). This also provides beneficial multi-

modal exposure of target vocabulary in both listening and reading passages (Schneider & Kulmhofer, 2016) with sufficient opportunity to attend to both form and meaning separately and together in rich semantic contexts (Baxter, et al., 2021). Each lower-level module contains three reading passages and two sets of two listening passages with note-taking practice. Each set of listening passages introduces concepts that are semantically related. For each listening set, there is also a writing activity that asks students to connect or compare the two listening passages, requiring students to draw on the notes they've taken. Not only does this facilitate multi-modal exposure, but it also allows for focused productive use of target language. For reading passages, extensive use of repeated reading and oral repeated reading is made to build reading fluency and familiarity with the target language (Birch, 2002; Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008; Taguchi et al., 2016). Considerable use of audio models and short recitation assignments are also made, to encourage students to pay greater attention to phonological forms of target language as this can facilitate learning and remembering (Lin, 2021). Due to student proficiency and time

constraints, GAV vocabulary and Grammar 30 Days are only occasionally used with many lower-level classes.

### 3. Preliminary Results

In 2021, 12 classes out of 15 (the control group) used a monolingual commercial textbook, as in past years, and followed the regular course curriculum. However, three classes out of the 15 (the experimental group) partially piloted early drafts of the Liberal Arts modules and fully piloted a new 30-lesson grammar program in one-half of their classes. In other words, one of their two teachers used the new materials in two class meetings a week, while the partner teacher used the monolingual commercial EFL textbook and regular course curriculum for the other two class meetings each week. All first-year students take the TOEFL ITP when they matriculate in April and then again in late December of their first year. The results of the control group and the experimental were then compared.

The 12 control group classes primarily using the monolingual English textbook posted an average score gain of **+14.6 points**.

The three upper-level experimental group classes

Table 2. TOEFL Score Gain of Three Pilot Classes

	Overall gain	Listening gain	Structure gain	Reading gain
Class 1	+27.5	+11.7	+11.33	+4.33
Class 2	+25.2	+12	+8.33	+4.6
Class 3	+19.2	+3.33	+13.33	+2.33
<b>Average of pilot study groups</b>	<b>+24</b>	<b>+9</b>	<b>+11</b>	<b>+3.75</b>
Average of all other classes	+14.6	+9.5	+3.9	-0.6

Note: Parts scores do not always add up to the exact overall gain due to percentages.

piloting the liberal arts modules and using grammar lessons in two of their four classes per week posted average gains of **+24 points**.

The three upper-level classes had no score declines in any section.

The data shows that classes which partially piloted content materials in the liberal arts and studied the new grammar lessons gained approximately +24 points from April to December. This was nearly 70% higher than the 12 lower-level classes primarily using the textbook. Some of those classes did draw on the Grammar 30 Days program and the GAV vocabulary lessons, but it appears that none of them did so consistently. These general observations suggest that higher scores are indeed possible, but require a comprehensive approach focusing on liberal arts reading and listening, academic vocabulary, and systematic grammar instruction. With this broader approach being implemented in 2022, the results of the next TOEFL ITP in December of 2022 will be analyzed and compared to previous years to assess its effectiveness.

#### 4. Discussion

Caution should be taken in interpreting the preliminary results above for several reasons. First, the three-class experimental group numbered only about 45 students in total (about 15 per class), so the pilot sample size is not so large. Next, for two of their four English classes, students in the experimental group were taught by the same teacher, so the 70% increase in their score could be the result of teaching style or halo effect rather than the liberal arts, academic vocabulary, and TOEFL-grammar materials used. Furthermore, the dependent variables were only TOEFL scores, and no qualitative assessment such as student-satisfaction surveys or self-report of learning was made. Finally, the three classes were upper-intermediate and advanced, so it is possible that the results will not be transferable to lower-

intermediate and intermediate level classes. On the other hand, historical TOEFL data in University A's first- and second-year English programs have shown much stronger TOEFL gains among lower-intermediate and intermediate classes than upper-level classes, particularly in years when large numbers of students have studied abroad. Results for more proficient groups have been inconsistent and varied wildly. Therefore, the consistent preliminary results above could also be interpreted as more robust than expected.

Other aspects of University A's first-year English program should also be taken into account in considering the results and the reform. Just as at most Japanese universities, students enrolled in University A have a wide range of English-language ability. Most universities make no attempt to place students of similar ability level in the same class. As Hale (2022) notes, streaming of students into courses organized by level of English ability is still relatively rare at Japanese universities. However, in University A, after taking the TOEFL and one or two other assessments during their first week of orientation, students are streamed and placed in classes with students of similar language skill levels. Although there is no exact dividing line, there are generally three skill levels of advanced, intermediate, and lower intermediate. Student TOEFL scores in the program typically range from about 340 to 550 (the ITP's score range is 310 to 677). The practical challenge this wide range presents is that a one-size liberal arts module cannot fit all students (similarly, one shortcoming of the previous curriculum was that all students and classes used the same global EFL commercial textbook). The reform leaders initially attempted to create three separate levels for each module, but the labor involved with crafting so many reading and listening passages for three different levels, along with other level-appropriate supporting learning activities, was overwhelming.

Starting with Module 2 Economics only two modules were created: one a paper-and-online version for advanced and upper-intermediate students, and a second module made available for teachers and lower-intermediate and intermediate students through Google Classroom. The overall content overlaps considerably: the lower-level modules have passages with the same concepts yet contain more simplified language, more basic vocabulary, and a narrower range of passages. Other university English programs using a liberal arts CLIL approach are likely to face this same challenge.

Next, the use of liberal arts content materials made more salient the fact that students' understanding of general English vocabulary varies widely. During the 2022 school year, the investigators discovered there were much wider gaps in students' knowledge of the most common 2,800 words in written English than they anticipated. This made the content-based reading and listening materials more challenging. In 2023, rather than beginning with the GAV vocabulary program in April, first-year students will first fill the gaps in their knowledge of the 2,800 most commonly used words in written English as they start their study of liberal arts fields, and then proceed to further study of general academic GAV vocabulary. When teaching a CLIL-based curriculum, there is always a delicate balance between content and language instruction, and that balance needs to be differently calibrated depending on student skill level.

Finally, it should be mentioned that a liberal arts-based English curriculum has created new possibilities for collaboration across the non-language-teaching faculty. Sociology and social psychology professors commented on and corrected the Sociology module, showing interest and giving encouragement as students taking their courses would in the future have some initial understanding of key concepts and vocabulary which they could draw on in their courses. An economics professor

commented on topics and corrected translations of key terms in the Economics module. Professors in health and medicine have been asked to provide feedback on the contents of the module on Health and Medicine. Noting this, a senior professor and the former head of the curriculum committee enthusiastically observed that basing first-year English on liberal arts content and receiving feedback from professors in the related fields creates special connections and unique possibilities for creative collaboration.

## 5. Conclusion

The single biggest challenge to curricular reform of the kind described in this practical research report is the enormous labor in producing well-designed teaching materials—liberal arts modules in this case—in at least two different versions. Faculty cooperation and collaboration is another challenge since some professors are strongly aligned with the communicative language-teaching paradigm rather than content-based teaching. A third challenge is buy-in from non-professor teaching faculty: Six of the ten teachers of first-year English are full-time contractual lecturers who actually teach the majority of the first-year courses (about 96 out of a total of 140 koma per week). New materials, materials-writing, and curricular innovation put an unusually heavy load upon these teachers. Fortunately, at University A, they have full-time employment, strong academic backgrounds, extensive teaching experience, take pride in their teaching, enjoy pedagogical challenges, and are skilled in materials creation.<sup>4</sup> Other universities—particular those with a large number of part-time language teachers—may not be able to count on such capable and dedicated non-tenured teaching faculty. For many universities, lack of sustained contact with students (one koma taught by one professor a week is common) and the absence of a unified curriculum (teachers often

select their own texts and use the pedagogical approach they see fit) poses further challenges.

The next year of reform (2023-24) will demand further iterations of materials, better tailoring of reading and listening content to students' language level, a new general vocabulary program, fuller implementation of program-wide content tests, and continual improvement and learning from mistakes. The authors hope that by the end of 2023 their course materials and liberal arts content will be ready for publication and wider distribution to similar English programs throughout Japan. This may take the form of coursebook publication with a major Japanese or international publisher, publication through a distribution service such as Kindle, or publication-distribution through a nationwide network such that now being established by ETS Japan and with whom the researchers are already in discussion. In the meantime, much work remains to be done. But the outlook is positive.

## 6. Notes

<sup>1</sup> TOEFL is a registered trademark of ETS.

<sup>2</sup> In the 2018 round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), students in Japan achieved mean scores of 504 in reading, 527 in mathematics, and 529 in science. Japanese students consistently scored higher than the OECD average in all rounds of PISA assessments. (Statista, 2022)

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of CLIL, see Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2012) *C.L.I.L Content and Language Integrated Learning*; and de Zarobe & Catalan (2009) *Content and Language Integrated Learning: Evidence from Research in Europe* and many other sources.

<sup>4</sup> The OECD (2019) reports that an average of 60% of the academic positions at Japanese universities are part-time. As Butler (2019) points out, universities in Japan have traditionally used part-time faculty to teach up to “two-thirds” of their overall courses,

which has been especially true of general education non-major courses such as English language classes. Butler further notes that at present university departments “rely on small armies of part-time instructors to teach the majority of their courses” (p. 25-26). These employment conditions and the lack of full-time teachers in English programs has been further exacerbated in recent years by the growing tendency for universities to even “‘outsource’ the teaching of their language classes to dispatch companies that contract foreign teachers on three-month contracts” (Butler, 2019, p. 28). Deacon (2009) observes that “part-time teachers, who teach the majority of classes in most programs, often have demanding schedules at multiple schools.” Extensive curriculum reform of a language program is extremely challenging without full-time teachers who, as noted in the text, have strong academic backgrounds, extensive teaching experience, take pride in their teaching, enjoy pedagogical challenges, and are skilled in materials creation.

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