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## Practical Research Reports

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### Sharply Increasing First-Year Students' TOEFL Score Gains by Implementing a Liberal Arts CLIL Curriculum: A Concluding Report on 2021-24 Curriculum Reform

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#### 【Abstract】

This Practical Research Report details a four-year action-research project (2021-2024) to reform a first-year English curriculum and improve TOEFL ITP score outcomes for students at a private Japanese university. It outlines reasons for the low average TOEFL scores for Japan (the third lowest in Asia), summarizes recommendations made in an initial curriculum reform plan, discusses innovations subsequently implemented, and reports on TOEFL ITP outcomes. During the four-year reformation, the researchers developed a liberal arts Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) curriculum that integrates academic reading, listening, writing, and grammar with six knowledge areas commonly featured on the TOEFL exam. Beyond the targeted topics, vocabulary from the New General Service List (NGSL), which includes 2,800 of the most common English vocabulary, and the Global Academic Vocabulary (GAV) lexicon, which focuses on frequently used academic English vocabulary, were adopted in the curriculum reform. During the initial stage of the reform from April to December 2021, the three-class experimental group achieved TOEFL score gains 70% higher than those of the 12-class control group. In the next year, April to December 2022, under the new CLIL curriculum, the entire first-year class achieved a score gain that was 140% higher than the preceding 7-year historical average. In the third year, April to December 2023, first-year students posted a score gain 107% above the historical average. In the fourth year of curriculum development (April to December 2024), first-year students posted a score gain 86% above the historical average. In addition to the substantial score gains, students also expressed high satisfaction rates with the new curriculum.

**Key words:** Liberal Arts, TOEFL, CLIL, First-Year English, Japan university curriculum

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## 調査・実践報告

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### 教養教育への言語統合教育カリキュラムの導入による1年生のTOEFLスコアの急伸： 2021年から2024年のカリキュラム改革の最終レポート

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#### 【要 旨】

本実践研究報告は、日本の私立大学の学生の初年次英語カリキュラム改革と TOEFL ITP スコアの改善のための、2021年から2024年までの4年に及ぶアクションリサーチプロジェクトの詳細を記したものである。本報告では、日本の TOEFL の低い平均点（アジアで3番目の低さ）の理由を概説し、当初のカリキュラム改革

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計画の提言を要約し、続けて実施した改革を論じ、TOEFL ITPの結果の報告を行う。この4年間の改革の間には、研究者が、TOEFLで頻繁に出題される6つの知識領域について、学問的な読解、聴解、作文、文法を統合した、教養のための内容言語統合型学習のカリキュラム (CLIL) を構築した。対象としたトピックに加えて、最も一般的な英語の語彙2800語であるNGSLの語彙と、最も頻度の高い学術英語の語彙であるGAVも、このカリキュラム改革に採用された。2021年4月から12月に渡る第一段階では、3クラスの実験群は12クラスの対照群に比べ、TOEFLのスコアの伸びが70%高かった。翌年、2022年4月から12月には新しいCLILカリキュラムのもとで、1年生の全体の伸びは過去7年間の平均より140%高かった。3年目である2023年4月から12月には、1年生は過去の平均を107%上回るスコアの上昇を示した。4年目となる2024年4月から12月には、1年生は過去の平均を86%上回るスコアの上昇を示した。大幅なスコアの向上に加え、学生は新しいカリキュラムに対して高い満足度を示した。

キーワード：教養、TOEFL、内容言語統合型学習 (CLIL)、初年次英語、日本の大学のカリキュラム

## Introduction

### 1. Project Background

This Practical Research Report is the third in a series of reports on action research to reform a first-year English curriculum and improve TOEFL ITP score outcomes for undergraduate students at a private Japanese university. The initial report, “First-Year English, Liberal Arts, and TOEFL: An Illustrative Case for Curricular Reform at Japanese Universities” (Wadden, 2021), speculated on the causes of low TOEFL scores in Japan, examined the first-year English curriculum of one *gakubu*, or faculty within a university (such as School of Engineering, Medical College, or Faculty of Liberal Arts), and recommended extensive changes, including adopting a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) curriculum to improve students' academic English skills and basic knowledge of liberal arts (Wadden, 2021). After its publication, the researchers received a three-year KAKENHI (Ministry of Education) grant (subsequently extended to a 4th year) to implement its recommendations. The second report, “Liberal Arts, TOEFL, and First-Year English Curriculum Reform: A Project in Progress” (Wadden et al., 2023a), detailed the curricular innovations underway, the rationale behind them, the challenges faced, and the

preliminary results from three pilot classes, which partially adopted the new curriculum. Compared with 12 control group classes that used the traditional instructional materials, the experimental group demonstrated TOEFL score gains nearly 70% higher (Wadden et al., 2023a). This final Practical Research Report revisits the recommendations initially made in 2021, describes the curricular changes implemented during the 2022–2024 period from those recommendations, and reports TOEFL results for all 15 classes in the *gakubu*'s new curriculum. The three sets of cumulative data from pre- and post-tests in 2022, 2023, and 2024 appear to indicate that adopting a liberal arts CLIL curriculum has increased students' TOEFL score gains 89% to 140% compared to their 7-year historical average. These results are relevant not only to the case-study program at University A as it seeks to meet its diploma policy goals and implement upper-level English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses but also suggest a pathway to success for 4-year private and public universities throughout Japan. This includes raising students' English proficiency for academic study, TOEFL performance, readiness for EMI study, and future career opportunities.

## 2. Reasons for Low TOEFL Scores and the Case for Liberal Arts in CLIL

According to ETS (Educational Testing Service), Japan has recorded among the lowest average TOEFL scores in Asia. In 2020, it reported that out of 35 Asian nations, Japan ranked third from the bottom in TOEFL iBT scores (ETS, 2020). Only Laos and Tajikistan recorded lower scores. Among the many reasons offered to explain Japan's comparatively low performance on international English benchmarks such as the TOEFL are an excessive emphasis on grammar in secondary education in Japan (Snyder, 2019) and an unfair linguistic advantage of other Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines that were colonized by English-speaking nations (Takeno & Moritoshi, 2018; Underwood & Glasgow, 2019). One demographic-statistical explanation of low performance is that in comparison to most other Asian countries, a larger number of Japanese students take the TOEFL each year, thereby 'dragging down' the national average (Reedy, 2000). Japan's low ratings in this measure of English proficiency relative to other countries continue to persist. Three years later, in 2023, ETS once again reported that Japan still ranked third from the bottom in Asia with an average score of 73, above only Laos and Tajikistan with their scores of 70 (ETS, 2023a).

The key question for the researchers in their 2001–2004 study (KAKENHI 21K00714) was whether Japanese TOEFL scores have remained low because high school and university curricula focus largely on language skills and fail to build basic knowledge and vocabulary in the traditional fields of the liberal arts (Wadden et al., 2023b). Our 2021–2024 findings strongly suggest the answer is “Yes.”

The texts required in first-year university study in North America, Britain, and other English-speaking countries—and those featured on the TOEFL—are academic, not personal, communicative, informal,

journalistic, or literary. This contrasts with the reading and listening texts commonly found in the commercial EFL textbooks widely used in Japanese high schools and universities and previously adopted in University A's first-year English program. The TOEFL places a strong emphasis on academic content. It serves as a benchmark for universities in 150 countries, particularly in North America, to evaluate international students' readiness for college-level courses in English. University A, like many other universities, uses the TOEFL to measure students' academic English proficiency. In Japan, for example, 153 universities now use the TOEFL ITP for “admission, placement, performance evaluation, pre-/post-tests, overseas program eligibility, and other purposes” (ETS, 2023b).

The executive director of TOEFL at ETS explains the test in this way: “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” (Gopal as quoted in Moody, 2020). At present, the ETS website (2024) explicitly states that the ITP reading test 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.”

The researchers' key hypothesis for their curriculum reform study (KAKENHI 21K00714) was that “overlooking these contents has been a major curricular shortcoming of Japanese high schools and universities in preparing students for English-medium study at the university level, domestically and internationally, as evidenced by low TOEFL performance” (Wadden et al., 2021, p.4). The results of the four-year curriculum reform reported below provide strong evidence in support of this hypothesis.

### 3. Curriculum Reform Proposed and Undertaken

In a report about CLIL curriculum reform to improve TOEFL test scores, Wadden (2021) proposed significant changes in English content for first-year university students.

- Adopt readings from the traditional areas of the liberal arts to provide students with basic knowledge and vocabulary in these fields while they simultaneously study to improve their English language skills.
- Use lecture and listening materials from the same content areas as the readings, applying and extending that knowledge by listening to TOEFL-like lectures on the same topics.
- Create a comprehensive and coherent academic vocabulary program with both general and subject-specific vocabulary that students can continually learn and review over their first two years of study.
- Add two additional 90-minute *koma* of liberal arts TOEFL-focused study to the first-year curriculum following the CLIL model.
- Add a one *koma* grammar and TOEFL-focused course taught by a small team of teachers with a particular interest in grammar instruction.
- Continue to expand third-year and seminar courses in English and find ways to make English meaningful and useful for students after their first two years of study.
- Hold regular teacher development workshops to give teachers further training in teaching academic reading, writing, listening, vocabulary, and grammar, and a better understanding of TOEFL.
- Apply for Ministry of Education grants to support curriculum revisions such as those outlined in this paper (pp. 133–34).

Remarkably, nearly all of the above recommendations were undertaken and implemented over the past four years.

To begin, the university faculty responsible for first-year English—in collaboration with full-time English teachers—have authored a year-long series of academic texts in six liberal arts knowledge areas: Health and Medicine, Zoology, Human Evolution, Earth Science, Economics, and Sociology. These modules—now expanded to separate reading and listening versions in each area—integrate the academic study of these basic knowledge areas with an improvement of English reading, listening, vocabulary, and writing skills, enacting CLIL. Two additional vocabulary programs, one based upon the 2,800 most commonly occurring words in English (the New General Service List) (Browne, 2014) and the other upon the most frequently used academic words in English (the Global Academic Vocabulary lexicon) (Wadden et al., 2016) are also studied. Two further *koma* of “Academic English” have been added—one in 2023 and one in 2024—to support and supplement the four *koma* English for Liberal Arts courses that all first-year students take. Although an additional grammar and TOEFL-focused course has not been added, grammar components have been incorporated into the new Academic English course. In addition, University A is expanding the number and types of courses taught in English for all qualified students, particularly for third- and fourth-year students, as well as international students, fulfilling the aim of making “English meaningful and useful for students” after their first two years of study.

Although the goal of holding regular teacher development workshops has not yet been fully realized, the ongoing collaboration required for the teaching team to continually revise and improve its materials—such as one set of liberal arts modules per month—has served as an informal, ongoing professional development opportunity. Teachers engage in this collaborative process weekly and even daily as they share materials and work together to create, administer, and grade monthly content tests in each

area. In addition, end-of-the-year professional development workshops have been adopted. Finally, the recommendation to apply for Ministry of Education grants was successfully implemented shortly after the initial project report (Wadden, 2021) was completed. The subsequent receipt of a KAKENHI grant provided critical support for the curriculum reform described in this report over the following four years.

The philosophical, pedagogical, and practical considerations of the curriculum reform outlined above are many and varied, and most have been extensively discussed in prior reports (Wadden, 2021; Wadden et al., 2023a) and an even more comprehensive article, “Transforming University English with CLIL Curricula: An In-depth Case Study” (Wadden et al., 2024). These include topics such as optimal course content, effective language teaching strategies, measurable outcomes, and the effective organizing of courses. This “Concluding Report” will, therefore, largely focus on reporting and discussing the results.

## Results

University A's administration prioritizes the improvement of TOEFL ITP scores as a measure of English achievement in the undergraduate programs of all faculties. Each year, the eight *gakubu* review their students' past year's performance by comparing it to the historical averages, such as the annual score gain from 2015 to 2024 in the case-study faculty. They also describe what efforts each *gakubu* is making to improve student TOEFL scores. Due to this scrutiny, the researcher-curriculum designers implemented their reform with caution. In 2021, just three classes out of 16 were selected for a partial pilot of early prototypes of the Liberal Arts modules. Two classes were made up of upper-level students and one class of higher mid-level students; all were assigned to their class by their April TOEFL ITP

score with an effort to balance the number of males and females. In each of the three experimental sections, one teacher used the traditional course materials for two classes per week, while the second teacher used a prototype of the new liberal arts modules for the other two classes. The traditional materials were *Unlock Book 4: Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking* (Cambridge University Press), a popular EFL/ESL textbook; teachers covered four chapters in the spring and four in the fall. Both experimental and control groups also used the same academic vocabulary and extensive reading programs, so those factors were identical and neutral. Some teachers teaching the control group occasionally used a Japanese TOEFL ITP listening text in their classes. At the end of the year, the students in the 13 control classes that used the usual curricular materials showed a 14.6-point increase in their TOEFL ITP scores from April to December. This gain is nearly identical to the average score increase of 14 points observed over the previous six years. By contrast, the average score increase in the three pilot courses that used the Liberal Arts-based materials in half of their class meetings was 24 points. This increase was 74% higher than the control group. The greater score gain of the control group is even more noteworthy because lower- and mid-level classes have historically shown larger TOEFL gains compared to upper-level classes. In general, the higher the students' initial TOEFL score, the harder it is for them to achieve a subsequent large score gain.

Following the results of the 3-class pilot, the new CLIL curriculum was adopted across all 16 classes in 2022. Although the 2021 pilot study offered grounds to be optimistic, the 2022 outcomes surpassed expectations. The entire first-year cohort achieved an average increase of 34 points, compared to the average increase of 14 points observed over the preceding seven years from 2015 to 2021. The new

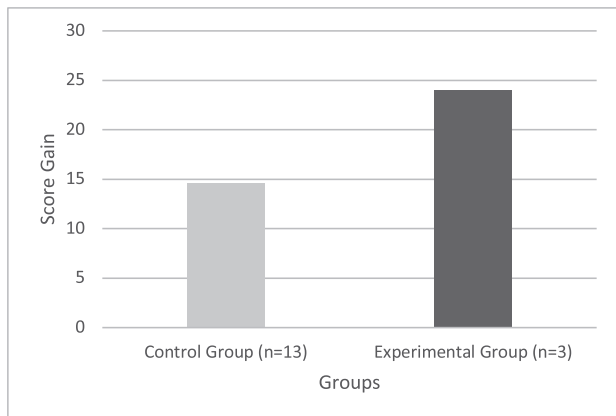


Fig. 1. Comparative TOEFL Score Gains: 2021 Control Group vs. Experimental Group

CLIL curriculum resulted in a score gain that was 140% higher.

In 2023, teachers collaborated to construct a new online Workbook. They further developed module content, implemented Content Tests for each liberal arts module, and added an extra *koma* to the students' English study, bringing the total to five *koma*. The students' TOEFL scores showed a considerable increase from April to December, again surpassing the historical average of 14 points. The 16 classes of students achieved a 29-point increase, which is 107% above the historical average.

In 2024, teachers further expanded the six liberal arts modules, creating separate reading and listening versions, each of which was more than 50 pages long. They refined the monthly Content Tests, and yet another *koma* was added to the students' Academic English course, bringing the total of weekly English classes to 6 *koma*. The students' TOEFL scores showed a notable increase from April to December, exceeding the historical average gain of 14 points. Across the 16 classes, students achieved an average gain of 26.4 points—an improvement of 89% above the historical norm. While slightly lower than the previous year's gain, the 26.4-point increase remains significant, particularly when considering the natural variability in scores due to standard error of measurement and differences across TOEFL administrations. This result demonstrates consistent and substantial progress in students' English proficiency compared to historical performance trends.

In addition to utilizing TOEFL criteria, the researchers also administered Student Satisfaction surveys to evaluate the students' perception of their first-year English courses. During the spring of

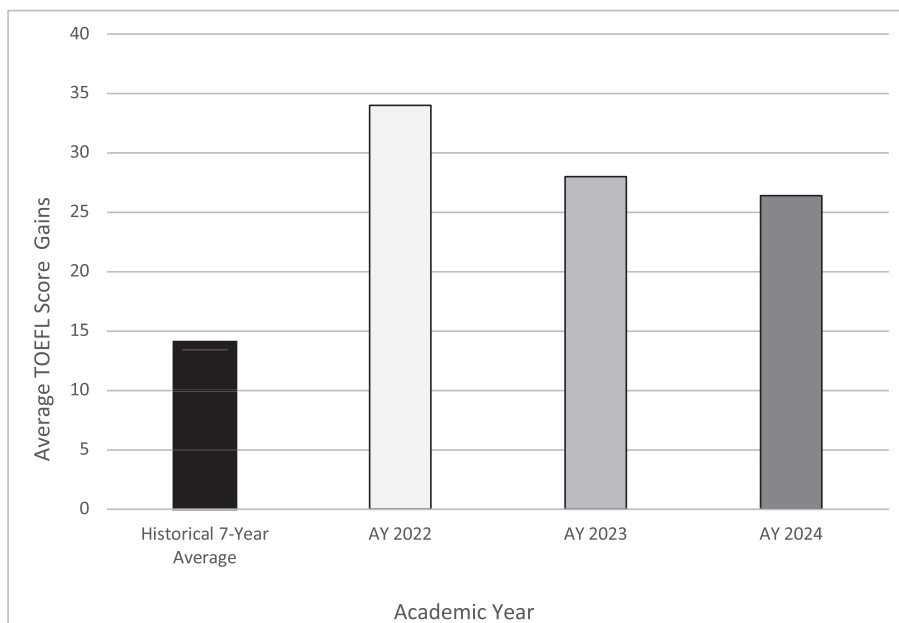


Fig. 2. Comparative Results from Full Liberal Arts CLIL Curriculum Implementation in 2022, 2023, and 2024

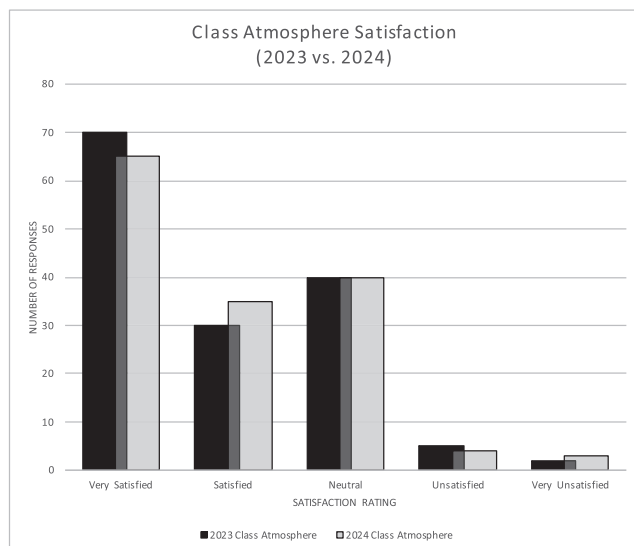


Fig. 3. Survey Results: Satisfaction with Classroom Atmosphere and Instructor's Approach (2023 and 2024)

2023, a total of 161 students out of 240 provided feedback by responding to the survey in Google Forms. The majority of respondents (67%) were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their present English classes. In 2024, 140 students out of approximately 254 responded to the same survey, and even a higher proportion (78%) indicated they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied.” Regrettably, no surveys were conducted in the seven years preceding the curriculum reform, so there is no comparative data.

**Discussion**

First, can the TOEFL score gains cited above be solely attributed to the adoption of a liberal arts CLIL curriculum? For the 2021 pilot, the answer is “Yes.” There were no other identifiable factors. However, starting in 2022, University A implemented a new online TOEFL training program across all eight of its *gakubu*. The online program, which students mostly pursued independently outside of class, was incorporated into the English course curricula of both first- and second-year students in the case-study *gakubu*. In theory, this could and should have impacted scores. However, an internal

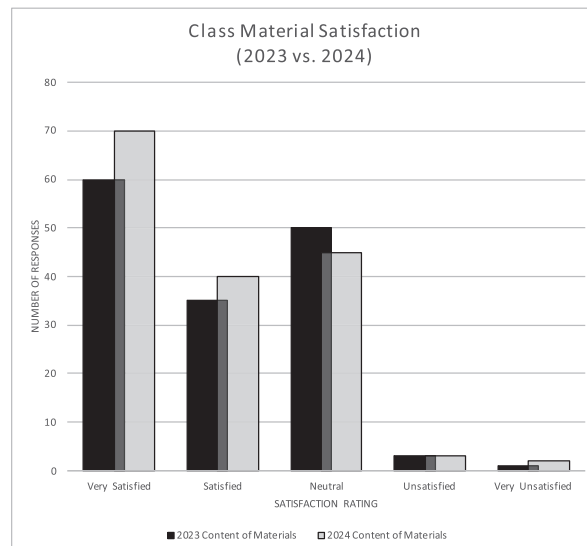


Fig. 4. Survey Results: Satisfaction with the Learning Materials (2023 and 2024)

analysis of the time students spent engaged in the online TOEFL program and the number of lessons they covered in the program showed no correlation with individual score gain. As the report on the analysis of nearly 450 students concluded, “The correlation data for both courses strongly suggest that the online TOEFL self-study program did not contribute significantly to any TOEFL improvement” (Van Amelsvoort, 2023). In addition, in 2023, another *koma* of Academic English was added to the first-year students' courseload; however, it did not seem to boost student scores compared to the previous year. In 2024, yet another *koma* of Advanced English was added with no increase in scores. Factors such as these raise the questions of how many *koma* are optimal for foreign language learning and how much weight a single benchmark such as TOEFL ITP score gain should be given in evaluating the success of a curriculum. Both are deserving of further study and discussion.

Another curriculum factor that might, at first glance, affect TOEFL score gain is the online extensive reading program that the 240 first-year students engage in. However, since that program was adopted several years prior to curriculum

reform, it should already be factored in to score gain.

One final question to consider is: Why use TOEFL ITP as a measurable outcome? There are many other English language tests, such as IELTS, Duolingo English Test, Pearson Test of English (PTE), The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and even the other widely used version of TOEFL—the TOEFL iBT. The answer comes down to widespread adoption, cost, and context. ETS reports that “more than 2,500 institutions in 50+ countries” administer the TOEFL ITP annually (ETS, 2025), and the paper-based ITP has been developed with exacting standards and used for over 50 years. In contrast, the Duolingo and Pearson tests are more recent and not nearly as widely known or accepted as benchmarks. Although the TOEIC is widely used and called a “Test of International Communication,” it is, in fact, mainly based upon texts and conversations in business contexts and used largely by corporations to assess the English skills of employees and applicants. On the other hand, while both the IELTS and the TOEFL iBT are recognized worldwide, they are extremely expensive on a per-student basis. As of the current writing, the IELTS costs ¥28,500 per student, and the TOEFL iBT is about ¥37,885. This is clearly unaffordable for a university to administer on a mass scale. By contrast, the TOEFL ITP costs institutions only several thousand yen per student, depending upon the number of tests administered.

Although some of the other exams, such as the TOEFL iBT and IELTS, include speaking and writing components (which makes them far more expensive), the TOEFL ITP is reliable in its measurement of academic listening and reading skills. For all of these reasons, universities such as the case-study University A administer the TOEFL ITP to their students twice a year as pre- and post-tests to measure the improvement of academic English skills during students' first year of study. In sum,

given this combination of factors, the TOEFL ITP appears to be the most accessible, reliable, and cost-effective English academic skills test available. It provides Japanese students and universities with a global standard by which to judge the level of their language skills.

All in all, it appears that at University A, the research objective to design an effective content-based curriculum that will improve students' academic readiness for university-level study in English and significantly boost TOEFL outcomes was successful. However, a strange anomaly occurred which university administrators and faculty should take note of. While the TOEFL ITP scores, English skills, and academic readiness of first-year students significantly progressed, those of second-year students stagnated. As is the case with many universities in Japan, second-year English study within the case-study *gakubu* has little connection with first-year English study and does not systematically build upon the students' first-year academic reading, listening, vocabulary, and grammar study. In 2022, the 230 second-year students showed a TOEFL ITP improvement of only 1 point, indicating no meaningful gain. In 2023, the TOEFL scores of the second-year cohort dropped 7 points. In 2024, second-year students posted a 2-point improvement.

These results suggest further action-research questions which the English faculty, the curriculum committee, and the university administration should now engage: *Once a strong first-year liberal arts curriculum is established, how can second-year English courses be re-envisioned to build on the first-year gains? And how can this crucial second-year study provide a vital bridge to EMI courses in which third- and fourth-year students can more fully engage in academic studies in English?* In short, curriculum reform should now be extended to the second-year program so that it includes more academic reading and listening content and

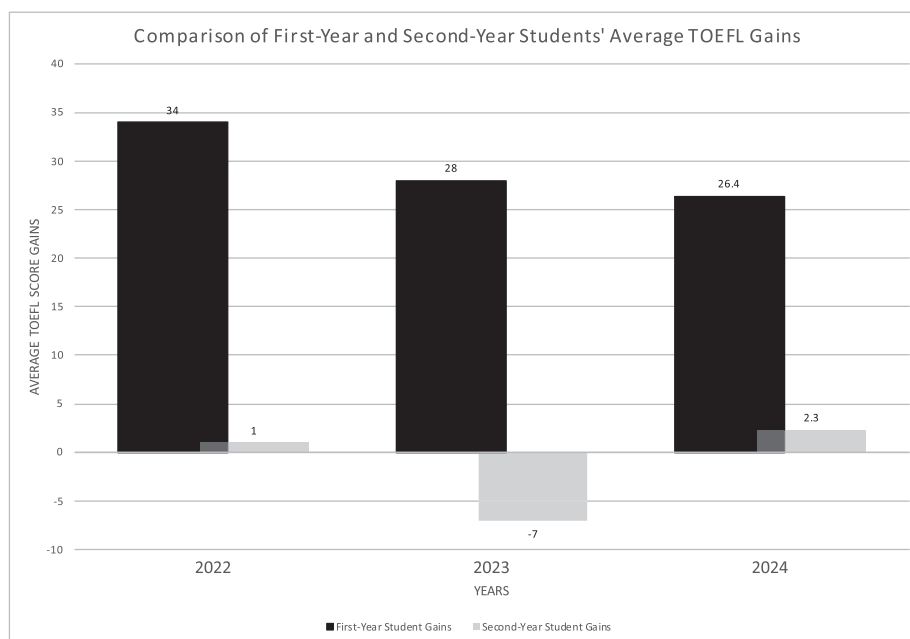


Fig. 5. Comparison of First-Year TOEFL Gain with Second-Year TOEFL Gain in 2022, 2023, and 2024

systematically builds academic vocabulary from first-year study. The goal should be to increase second-year TOEFL scores by approximately 25 points, which, combined with first-year gains of 30 or more, will bring many more students to the level at which they can effectively take EMI courses, engage in English academic study overseas, gain more autonomy in their own language learning, and reach a proficiency that will be valuable for their future careers.

### Conclusion

In 2023, Harvard Education Press published a major volume on innovation and reform entitled *Whatever It Is, I'm Against It: Resistance to Change in Higher Education*. In the book, author Brian Rosenberg, a long-time president of an American liberal arts university, makes a devastating critique of the inability of universities to adapt and innovate (2023). Howard Browne (2023), a leading scholar on higher education in Japan, similarly notes that the pace of innovation at Japanese universities tends to be very slow. Regarding this particular curricular reform at University A, Wadden (2021) observed:

Universities in general and faculty (or “schools”) within certain universities tend to develop and adapt slowly over time. There are always competing interests, aims, and emphases: What courses to require, which majors to establish and support, or what positions and programs to fund? The recommendations made in this report for first-year English in University A are idealistic and may be impractical given institutional restraints. Yet, they would robustly fulfill the aims of increasing students' academic readiness for courses in English, deepen knowledge of the liberal arts, and boost TOEFL scores (p. 133).

This concluding investigative report suggests that, behind the scenes, a remarkable story unfolded that one might contrast with the Harvard book title above, “If It's Thoughtful, I'm For It: Support for Significant Change in Higher Education.” Over a span of four years—with the clear vision and unwavering support of deans, assistant deans, senior professors, curriculum committee chairs, English faculty, and hard-working teachers—an English

curriculum was redesigned almost entirely from scratch and then expanded, leading to the doubling (or near doubling) of its students' first-year TOEFL score gains. The administrators of University A—and the English teaching team—accomplished a reform that is extremely difficult to achieve. Through a “natural experiment” (a research process in the real world with empirical benchmarks), they have also shown a pathway for universities across Japan to follow in achieving similar results as their institutions attempt to implement MEXT-supported EMI courses and expansion of English curricula for foreign and Japanese students (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019).

Despite initial success, curriculum reform is never a 'finished project,' like a completed building. In practice, it should always be a form of ongoing inquiry—alive, intelligent, and in motion—in accordance with the principle of *Fudan Zenshin* (不斷前進)—that is, continually moving forward—and if possible, based upon the humanistic and educational principle of Jin (仁), compassion and humanity. The case-study *gakubu* in University A has taken a major step forward in first-year English and now needs to extend comparable reform to second-year English as it integrates liberal arts and English throughout its entire 4-year undergraduate program.

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