Liberal Arts, First-year English, and TOEFL
An Illustrative Case for Curricular Reform at Japanese Universities

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【Abstract】

For the past 20 years Japan has recorded among the lowest average TOEFL scores in Asia. One reason is that high school curricula and even TOEFL-preparation programs focus mainly on language skills and test-taking practice and do not build basic knowledge and vocabulary in the traditional fields of the liberal arts upon which TOEFL is based. This article reviews the first-year English curricula in a liberal arts faculty at one Japanese university and suggests that liberal arts CLIL-based instruction is needed to build knowledge schema and vocabulary to take content courses in English and to improve TOEFL listening and reading performance. It also makes suggestions about strengthening the academic writing component and further cultivating English as the language of class participation. Many of these recommendations are relevant to university departments and faculties throughout Japan. In the case study university, students are engaged in fewer than 200 hours of English instruction in their first-year compared with 300 to 500 hours at leading liberal arts universities which achieve first-year student TOEFL ITP gains of between 40 to 50 points. This article suggests ways English study could be expanded, teacher development enhanced, and opportunities for further meaningful English developed.

Key words: Liberal arts, TOEFL, CLIL, Japanese higher education, Japan university curriculum

リベラルアーツ、1 年次英語科目、そして TOEFL
－日本の大学でのケーススタディにおける英語カリキュラム改編にむけた提案－

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【要　旨】

　日本の TOEFL 受験者のスコア平均は、過去 20 年アジアで最下位レベルを記録している。背景には高等学校のカリキュラムがあるが、TOEFL 受験準備に特化した講座の多くが言語・受験スキルの訓練に偏っており、TOEFL が文脈とするリベラルアーツの伝統的分野の基礎知識や語彙を習得させていないことも問題である。本稿では、日本の大学のリベラルアーツ学部の英語カリキュラムを概観し、リベラルアーツを内容として教える CLIL 型英語プログラムを提案する。この試みは、内容学習に必要な知識体系と語彙を身につけさせ、TOEFL リスニング・リーディングのスコアを上げることを狙いとする。これに加え、アカデミックライティング強化と学習するための言語としての英語力の育成も提案する。本稿の提案は、本稿でケーススタディとして研究対象とする国際教養学部のみならず、日本の他大学も視野に入れたものである。現在、ケーススタディ中の大学の 1 年次英語は、年間 200 時間行かないのである。これに対し、優れたリベラルアーツ教育を実践する他大学は、1 年次英語に 300 ～ 500 時間が充てられており、ITP テストで 40 ～ 50 点のスコア上昇が見られている。本稿は、ケーススタディ中の大学やほかの大学に類する文脈で、より多くの英語科目 のコマ数、より強固な教員養成、そしてより実践的な英語使用の機会を提供する案を提示する。

キーワード：リベラルアーツ、TOEFL、CLIL、日本の高等教育、日本の大学カリキュラム

1. Introduction

In the volume *Teaching English to Second Language Learners in Academic Contexts*, Newton, Ferris, Goh, Grabe, Stoller & Vandergrift observe, "Skills-based teaching is at the core of EAP instruction" (2018, p. 1). This is a widely held premise of contemporary language teaching. Yet two paradigms of language teaching theory and practice, one long-established and the other more recent, suggest it is a hazardous oversimplification. Traditional Content-Based Instruction (CBI) dating from the late 1980s emphasizes the importance of using thoughtful content for language learning. CBI originated mainly in the United States and was implemented particularly in secondary and tertiary educational settings (see Brinton, Snow & Wesche (1989)'s *Content-Based Second Language Instruction* and Stryker & Leaver (1997)'s *Content-Based Instruction in Foreign Language Education: Models and Methods*. More recently, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach has spread widely in Europe and has been adopted throughout the primary-secondary-tertiary educational sectors. It is similarly based upon the theoretical and pedagogical assumption that integrating the content of particular subjects with language instruction is optimal to effectively learn a foreign language (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*). This means, in practice, for example, to study science in English to learn English rather than through separate English classes. In some contexts and for some curricular purposes, *particular content* is crucial for achieving learning competencies and curricular outcomes, whether these are readiness for university coursework in English (in Japan or abroad), or higher TOEFL scores indicating such readiness, or both. In the spirit of the Japanese cultural and organizational principle of "continuous improvement" (*kaizen*), the following positive critique makes recommendations for further improving an already thoughtfully designed skills-based, first-year English curriculum at case study University A. These recommendations involve mainly increasing focus on content in teaching academic English skills (CLIL), but also on building a strong foundation of vocabulary, increasing teacher development, and altering some classroom practices.

From my 35 years of researching, writing about, and working in Japanese higher education and sometimes serving as a university curriculum consultant, I rate the coherence, the texts, and quality of University A's English courses to be among the top ten percent among such English language courses at Japanese universities. However, as in many universities across Japan, to more fully prepare students for taking content courses in English (in their own university or overseas), to further improve their skills in academic English, and to demonstrate their progress in knowledge and ability as measured by the TOEFL, reform and revision of first-year curricula are needed.

2. Background

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, literary, or journalistic. Readings tend to be organized in an introduction-body-conclusion structure with long paragraphs that are rich in information and objective in tone. Lectures have similar content and follow the same format, though with slightly less formal language. Students taking introductory classes at North American universities (whether native English-speaking students or international students) are expected to have already acquired a general

knowledge of the concepts and vocabulary of the traditional areas of the 20th century liberal arts−from sociology to zoology and history to earth science−but not specialized knowledge or technical vocabulary in these areas. Tests which North American students take to demonstrate their level of readiness for college study are straightforwardly based upon such texts and content; these include the SAT (previously known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, now simply the SAT), the ACT (originally called the American College Test, now only the "ACT"), and the various Advanced Placement (AP) exams produced by College Board.

The same is unequivocally true of the TOEFL−the benchmark that such universities use to evaluate international students' readiness to take college courses in English and which University A and many other universities throughout Japan also use to measure students' academic English skills. According to Educational Testing Service (ETS), the organization which makes and globally administers the test, the TOEFL is accepted by more than 11,000 universities and institutions in over 150 countries (2020).

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" (Gopal as quoted in Moody, 2020). The ETS website explicitly states that the ITP reading test, the form of the test most widely used by universities in Japan, including University A, 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). One of the biggest shortcomings of TOEFL courses and preparation materials in Japan−and worldwide−is that they tend to ignore this fact:

namely, that one has to build knowledge in academic fields to demonstrate skill improvement. Instead, TOEFL courses, programs, and materials−and high school curricula for English in Japan−often focus almost completely on language skills, communicative English, or test-taking practice with little or no supportive liberal arts content. In language-teaching terminology, they are pre-CLIL, pre-Content-based approaches to study.

This is one of the reasons why Japan as a country has for the past 20 years typically recorded among the lowest average TOEFL scores in Asia. In 2019, for example, out of 35 Asian nations, only Laos and Tajikistan recorded lower average scores on the TOEFL iBT. To be fair, one demographic-statistical cause of this poor performance in Japan's case is that in comparison to most other Asian countries a very large number of its students take the TOEFL each year, dragging down its national average. As Reedy, back in 2000 explained,

> the statistics do not mean the average Japanese college-age student scores lower than his/her average counterpart abroad, as many pundits have suggested. Obviously, a significantly larger number of Japanese students are taking the test than in other countries. With a bit of demographic research, we discover that a much larger percentage of Japanese students as a percentage of the total college-age population sit for the TOEFL than do students in most (but not all) of the countries listed in the table" (emphasis in original).

More recently, Underwood and Glascow (2019, p. 156), similarly point out, "One reason that Japanese students as a whole score so low on the test is that a far larger portion of the population takes the test (in contrast to North Korea and even China), and their average scores suffer regression to the mean."

Since the proportion, the purpose, and the preparation of students taking the TOEFL around

the world varies widely, ETS cautions that score comparisons between countries is "a misuse of data" (2020). Despite this caution, the low TOEFL scores of Japanese students *do* suggest that the Japanese educational system is falling short in the quality of its English education and failing to produce graduates who are internationally as competitive as their counterparts in other Asian countries. This is especially true given, as Underwood & Glasgow put it, "the economic resources at Japan's disposal" compared to many other Asian nations (2019, p. 156). Perhaps an even more important point is simply this: Gains in academic readiness indicated by 40- to 50-point gains in TOEFL scores of first-year Japanese students are routinely achieved at some leading liberal arts universities in Japan. This shows that a properly focused curriculum *plus* sufficient instructional hours can substantially improve academic readiness for college study in English and significantly raise students' TOEFL scores.

3. Curriculum
Reading

Intensive Academic Reading. In University A, the principal texts for first-year academic writing and academic reading are thoughtfully chosen, high-quality, level-appropriate texts. *Inside Writing* (Burgmeier & Lange, 2014) takes a genre-based approach‒integrating writing, reading, well-selected vocabulary, and a variety of exercises. *Academic Encounters* (Williams, Brown & Hood, 2012) features well-written reading passages at an appropriate level for its students (although some readings are becoming outdated), exercises that guide students in developing reading strategies and understanding English text, vocabulary-building activities, and a "sustained content approach" (Williams, Brown & Hood, 2012). If University A did not use TOEFL as a benchmark in assessing

development in academic skills, these texts might be suitable. However, their shortcoming is that the "sustained content" in both texts is imperfectly aligned with the subject-matter of the TOEFL‒in the words of the ETS TOEFL director quoted above, "first- or second-year *liberal arts*" classes (emphasis added). The texts therefore are not equal to the challenging task of building the knowledge schema needed to take content courses in English and essential to boosting TOEFL performance.

Inside Writing I, for instance, contains readings that are mostly from websites, newspapers, and blog posts, not textbooks or academic articles. These brief readings draw from travel to health to pop psychology to light science to illustrate the different genres of writing which students then engage in. However, they fall short of providing students a systematic development of the schema for first-year university courses and the TOEFL. *Academic Encounters 3*, the first-year students' reading text, presents longer readings than *Inside Writing*; these are written in academic style and register and skillfully simplified so they are the right level for most students. Overall, *Academic Encounters* is an acceptable text for its aim and purpose: skills-based learning for first-year university students. Moreover, a few of its chapter topics‒particularly those relating to sociology‒present excellent vocabulary and basic background for that field. The book also teaches students a variety of reading strategies and helps them understand how academic texts are constructed. Unfortunately, the textbook fails to cover academic areas beyond sociology and media, and its chapters on gender and crime present topics unlikely to appear on the TOEFL. This is because TOEFL avoids topics that are controversial or that might cause discomfort among some test-takers, such as gender, crime, drug use, alcohol consumption, religion, politics, and even psychology as the field relates to mental illness, psychotherapy, and

counseling.

As with course materials used in many Japanese universities, the two texts *Inside Writing* and *Academic Encounters* are best utilized for academic and English skills-building. To provide students with the basic knowledge, vocabulary, and schema for the traditional fields of the liberal arts, other texts need to be used. Or individual departments and programs must develop their own texts.

Extensive Reading. First-year English at University A utilizes one of the best extensive reading programs available—Xreading—to cultivate reading speed and reading efficiency. Over the course of each term, and even over the summer, students read numerous relatively easy books, with a cumulative target of 80,000 to 100,000 words for each period, to move beyond the word-by-word decoding of lower level learners to more fluent reading in English. In theory, this will also help improve students' academic reading skills. Unfortunately, little hard data exists at present to support this assumption. One challenge faced by University A and other universities that use such extensive reading programs is to consider to what extent intensive reading and extensive reading should be further linked to strengthen their reciprocal impact, such as by having extensive reading assignments directly related to course content rather than student choice.

Listening

In developing academic listening skills, it is even more crucial to connect materials to course content. Academic listening skills develop more surely and substantially when students already have some basic knowledge of the topic being presented in a lecture (in other words, genre and topic-related schema). This again points to acquiring basic knowledge and vocabulary of particular liberal arts areas (biology, sociology, economics, health) through intensive academic reading, and then applying and extending

that knowledge by listening to TOEFL-like lectures on the same topics. It is very difficult, for example, to comprehend a general lecture on biology and correctly answer questions relating to it without knowing the meaning of terms such as "genus," "species," "mammal," "reptile," "insect," and other such foundational concepts.

Vocabulary

The English-teaching faculty at University A is unusually committed to vocabulary learning, which falls through the curricular cracks at many Japanese universities. In both writing and reading courses, students regularly receive vocabulary lists related to the contents; they are quizzed on the words and encouraged to engage in "deeper learning" by taking notes on the words. Students are also required to purchase and selectively use a popular Japanese TOEFL vocabulary text with 3800 words. The shortcoming of this approach is that the diverse vocabulary students learn in each class could have more coherence and be even more reliably acquired if most of the words were from one principal source which all students could access over time, all the time. In addition, the vocabulary featured in the TOEFL vocabulary text is not corpus-based—meaning, the vocabulary is simply chosen by the author and fails to accurately reflect the most essential vocabulary that students should learn.

Rather than many lists from many sources and a non-corpus based vocabulary text, it would be optimal for the faculty at University A to choose one comprehensive and coherent academic vocabulary text or online vocabulary program (based upon corpus research) with both general and subject-specific vocabulary that students can continually learn and review over their first two years of study. To encourage retention of previously studied vocabulary, comprehensive review tests should be given at regular intervals to encourage review and

support the memory principle of spaced repetition. If the text includes selections of subject-specific vocabulary, students can further draw selectively on it when they take content, English-medium instruction (EMI), or seminar courses during their third and fourth years.

For a discussion of approaches to contemporary vocabulary teaching and learning in Japanese universities, see "Teaching and learning vocabulary in the Japanese university" (Wadden, Browne & Nation, 2019) in *Teaching English at Japanese Universities: A New Handbook*.

Speaking

There is no separate speaking course for first-year students at University A. However, as Newton et al. (2018) observe in "Teaching language skills in EAP contexts," "speaking rarely occurs without listening, writing is typically connected to reading, and listening (to lectures, for instance) is usually linked to reading and writing" (p. 1). The skill by skill discussion in this article largely ignores the actual integration of skills that occurs within University A's first-year writing course (which includes reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and speaking) and the first-year reading course (which also includes these, in addition to pair-speaking tasks, discussion tasks, and presentation tasks). To improve students' speaking skills, English should as much as possible be the language of instruction and of student class participation. Students (and sometimes teachers) naturally revert to Japanese to communicate more effectively, but in doing so many students lose their only chances to practice and improve their spoken English. This reflects a general cultural tendency throughout universities in Japan, whereby students tend to instinctively switch to Japanese in small-group discussions. Universities throughout the country, including University A, must better cultivate a culture of speaking English

in the classroom. This can be aided by building into lessons appropriate functional language such as "language to use for discussion," brief sample dialogues, and pattern practice of useful expressions. The fact that the class period is a precious time for language use, and that the classroom is a safe space for language practice, needs to be more emphasized.

Writing

At present, the first-year writing course at University A and its *Inside Writing* text adopt a genre approach to developing writing skills. In successive units during their first year, students compose a brief description, a short health recommendation, a summary, a brief argument in the form of a letter to the editor, a personal narrative, a test response, an informational brochure, a description of a science-related process, and a blog article. The strength of this approach—its breadth—is also its weakness; that is, it lacks focus and focused development. For the teaching and learning of academic writing, first-term students should instead write a three- to five-paragraph opinion essay almost every week to become accustomed to the form, as well as to internalize the use of topic sentences, supporting sentences, and discourse markers. In addition, writing is best learned through the stages of pre-writing, initial drafting, and revision, and should incorporate peer review, self-evaluation, and formative feedback from the teacher. In the second term, the argumentative essay can be expanded to include simple evidence from other sources, such as quotations from experts and data from studies. During their second year, students should continue writing research-based argumentative essays that eventually include some original research such as survey or interview results, along with more extensive evidence from experts and research studies. Focus on the genre of argument and research-based argument more closely corresponds

with most academic writing and with the TOEFL iBT, and better prepares students to write seminar papers and graduation theses. It should be noted that according to teachers at University A, process writing and peer feedback previously were salient features of the writing course but were recently reduced in emphasis due to the adoption of the new genre-based coursebook.

Grammar

Since TOEFL score gains are important at University A, a one-period-a-week TOEFL grammar instruction course should be added to the curriculum. Students need intensive review of high school and cram school grammar, and precise explanations *in Japanese* are most useful for building their grammar proficiency. (This is the one exception that should be made to English being the main language of instruction during English classes.) Furthermore, since many middle schools and high schools in Japan have shifted to more communicative language teaching, many students have received little systematic instruction in English grammar. Additional TOEFL test practice (including selective reading and listening practice, or general academic vocabulary learning) could also be included in the latter part of the period. This course could be taught by a small team of dedicated teachers in a large lecture classroom possibly with 50-60 students in a class. While grammar instruction may not substantially boost academic readiness for courses in English, one period a week of focused grammar instruction would help students improve their understanding of the structure of English and significantly raise their scores on the ITP structure section, which makes up one-third of the test and one-third of the score.

4. How best to achieve the changes above?

Universities in general and faculty (or "schools")

within particular universities innovate slowly over time. There are always competing interests, aims, and emphases: what courses to require, which majors to establish and support, what positions and programs to fund. Institutional resources are typically limited if not already stretched thin. The recommendations made below 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.

1. Add two *koma* of English for liberal arts TOEFL-focused study to the first-year curriculum. This follows the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) model which appears to be gaining support from the Ministry of Education (Brown & Bradford, 2019). Like most universities in Japan, first-year students at University A have fewer than 200 classroom hours of English during their first year. This compares with more than 300 hours at leading liberal arts universities that show ITP gain of 30-40 points, and nearly 500 hours for average ITP gains of 50 points. Moreover, at present, the first-year students at University A have their attention divided among 10 or so different courses, including often a second foreign language; this means that the curriculum offers them insufficient focus on English and diverts their attention to too many competing areas of study, including other foreign languages. At universities with a reputation for strong English achievement, second foreign languages are often offered only from the sophomore year, after students have had a chance to build a firm foundation in English.

2. Add a one-koma grammar and TOEFL-

focused course taught by a small team of teachers with a particular interest in grammar instruction. These could be adjunct lecturers or even qualified part-time teachers. These additional focused hours in English are likely to result in significant gains in TOEFL and also increase students' confidence in their understanding of English language structure.

3. Continue to expand third-year and seminar courses in English and find ways to make English meaningful and useful for students. For example, at one leading Japanese liberal arts university, after students' semi-intensive first year of English study (more than 300 hours), they take two English courses as sophomores, and are required to take at least three regular courses in English to graduate, which gives their first-year English study practical value and meaning. At another prominent liberal arts university, an ITP score of 550 is necessary for study abroad in one of its partner programs, which itself is a requirement for graduation. Rules—such as graduation requirements or minimum TOEFL scores—do not in themselves increase motivation and learning (and sometimes subvert them), but courses and opportunities to use English and apply English skills do. Perhaps ways can be found, for example, to increase participation in University A's existing first-year summer program and additional overseas programs in English could be implemented during second- and third-year study.

4. 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.

5. Shift some scheduling and other administrative duties from English-teaching faculty to a specialized Academic Affairs Office staff member who can use technology to optimize scheduling, classroom assignments, and course administration. This allows faculty to devote more time to the curriculum development and teacher training that only they can do (in addition to their committee work, entrance-exam writing, course-wide management responsibilities, study-abroad program oversight, language learning support, and day-to-day class administration responsibilities).

6. Apply for Ministry of Education grants to support curriculum revisions such as those outlined in this paper. With its admirable commitment to measuring academic readiness and English language skills with regular administrations of the TOEFL at the beginning and end of every year, University A is positioned to engage in a "natural experiment" by changing curriculum and observing how it effects TOEFL outcomes. Many universities in Japan face the same challenges as University A and MEXT has for many years been seriously concerned about the low average TOEFL scores of Japanese students. University A is well situated to receive significant support for thoughtful innovation that could both benefit its own students and potentially be an exemplar for other universities and university programs in Japan.

5. Caveats, Contemplations, Conclusion

Caveats are too numerous to all be mentioned here. It is not easy to create a liberal arts TOEFL-based curriculum. Few if any language-teaching texts with this kind of sustained content currently exist—particularly ones that are appropriate for the

level of University A's students and which then increase gradually in difficulty as student proficiency rises. At University A, many texts and instructional materials will have to be made from scratch, an enormous load on a busy teaching staff. Can a sequence of such materials and instruction be crafted so that it also stimulates motivation and curiosity? Will University A's English teaching team embrace such an approach? With their other responsibilities, do they have enough time to devote to developing it? Will MEXT support the development of such a curriculum? As mentioned above, there are always competing interests as well as constraints in a university. Is it a priority, given the universities' other divisions and faculty, to further invest intensively in faculty in one particular area—English education? As one member of the English teaching team wrote to the author upon reading an initial draft of this article, "Transitioning from our current system to a new one will require a lot of planning and effort." In conclusion, I would like to stress that this paper is just one person's view, and other faculty have considered these issues deeply and have thoughtful, well-informed opinions to offer. One significant limitation of this article is that it fails to gather and articulate those viewpoints; another is that it does not provide the background discussion and debate that led to the development of the curriculum as it exists at the present time.

The principle of *kaizen*—continual improvement—is most associated with Japanese companies such as Toyota Motors. But it can be a guiding aim at Japanese institutions of higher learning. The curricular innovations for university first-year English, liberal arts, and TOEFL study outlined in this article are offered in this spirit.

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