

## A Philosophical Curriculum for a Higher Education Language Program

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Theoretically, there are potentially several philosophical foundations that could be applied to curriculums for institutions of higher learning. However, given the dynamic of many colleges and universities in Japan, only a few may be realistic. That is, since students are only enrolled in formal higher education for two to four years, and because their academic background may not be of the highest caliber, we as instructors can only hope to achieve certain goals in a short amount of time. Moreover, only one philosophical foundation may not necessarily fit or accommodate the general aims of a department or the needs of the students. Therefore, for general studies departments in higher education, we propose a potential curriculum based on the philosophical foundations. Specifically, a curriculum based on the framework of Essentialism for first year students followed by Progressivism for second year students will be proposed along with research of how this philosophical curriculum may be employed in the traditional classroom and beyond with the use of the Internet.

### **Educational Context**

The educational institutions depicted for this paper comprise two year junior colleges and two four year universities in the Kanto region. Students who attend the institutions are required to take a designated amount of credit hours of a foreign language for graduation. The curriculum at the depicted institutions requires students to enroll in both core and elective courses in order to graduate. However, after the required courses are fulfilled, students may choose to continue the study of foreign language (for the purpose of this paper, English) through elective courses, while choosing a course of study or major offered by the institution. All classes are held once a week for 90 minutes in 13 or 14 week terms or semesters. The ability of students represents a typical bell curve as during the course of two years a few students drop out of the program, the majority of students earn satisfactory marks to graduate, and only a few students eventually reach

their goal of transferring to a university, obtaining a teaching position, or gaining employment in an occupation that utilizes their English skills.

### **Essentialism for First Year Students**

Essentialism contains the philosophical base of both Idealism and Realism which both emphasize the hierarchy of subjects for learning. The aim of this educational philosophy is, "To promote the intellectual growth of the individual" (Orstein & Hunkins, p.55). Many of the first year students who enter an English language program lack the academic skills not only in English but also in Japanese, as well as other fields such as mathematics, science and history. Therefore, the first logical step would be to enhance their scholastic skills and background knowledge of the world before they advance to the second year.

In order to propose Essentialism, we first emphasize that this philosophy is centered on a curriculum instilling the essential skills which include courses such as science, history, math and foreign languages. As a result, instructors could research and select materials that focus on the development and knowledge of these basic fields. Therefore, for the purpose of offering direction concerning classroom instruction, we would inform colleagues that Essentialism focuses on the explicit teaching of facts and knowledge to develop students' intellect. In addition, in order to offer a method of assessment, we would tell our peers that at the conclusion of a course, students should demonstrate mastery of the concepts and principles before they graduate onto the second year.

An example of how Essentialism may be employed for the first year language students is for teachers to design a regulated syllabus which introduces new vocabulary, grammar or expressions every week. After reviewing and delivering the subject matter, students could demonstrate their mastery of the material through tests, interviews or even short skits in which students use the vocabulary and grammatical structures introduced in the semester.

### **Progressivism for Second Year Students**

Once students have demonstrated mastery of the fundamentals and graduate onto the next year, the philosophy of Progressivism could be adapted for second year courses with elective courses being offered beyond the required core courses. Progressivism contains the philosophical base of Pragmatism which emphasizes the, "interaction of the individual with environment" and helps "prepare individuals for change" through the use of problem-solving skills (Orstein & Hunkins, p.37). This type of education would help students prepare not only for situations they may encounter in their careers, but also for challenges

they may encounter in their daily life after graduation.

In order to propose Progressivism at a higher level institution, we would first inform instructors that this philosophy focuses on students' learning from their experiences rather than the mastery of facts. Therefore, teachers should find materials and activities that stimulate students' interests and challenge them to solve real-life problems. Second, for the purpose of classroom instruction, rather than being an authority figure, teachers would be urged to act as a "guide for problem solving and scientific inquiry" (Orstein & Hunkins, p.55) and teach learners, "how to think and not what to think" (Beglar, p.13). Lastly, in order to offer some type of assessment so that instructors may evaluate students, we would emphasize that since this philosophy is centered around active and relevant learning, students grades could be based on earnest and consistent participation as well as thoughtful reflections with regard to the activities they engage.

An example in which Progressivism may be employed for second year English language students is to have them enroll in elective options that offer content courses taught in the target language. As a result, students would have the opportunity to learn more about the world through the context of English. In addition, students could also engage in problem-solving exercises. To illustrate, in the Stranded at Sea activity, for example, students are required to brainstorm about how materials remaining from a plane crash may be used in order to survive on a deserted and secluded island. The instructor's role would be to facilitate the activity and monitor the progress of the students. However, in order to succeed, students must use their English communication skills to equally participate and contribute. In addition, at the conclusion of the exercise, students could also be given writing assignments which require them to reflect and express in English what they learned from the activity.

### **Issues in Curriculum Development**

While this paper has focused on philosophies of instruction, this next section will touch on the topic of curriculum development in order enhance existing language programs at higher level institutions. First, instructors and administrators may be resistant to change for a wide variety of reasons. Some may feel that curriculum change means an increased workload of either additional classes and or preparing for new ones. In addition, when change comes from authority, it may cause instructors to feel ignored or powerless. For instructors, this may potentially foster feelings of anxiety not only with regard to their future within an institution, but also with regard to the security of their careers. To overcome restraining forces, however, it is important to include the thoughts and opinions of all those teachers who are front and center in the classroom day in and day out. When

this is done, the final product of a new curriculum is likely to be accepted and implemented. As Orstein and Hunkins state,

All change originates with individuals; individuals change, and, through their changed behaviors, institutions change. Change occurs when individuals' concerns are made known. All change is personal, and for individuals to "buy into" change they must have ownership of both the concern and the process.

(Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.315)

Therefore, to constructively carry out curriculum reform with new educational philosophies, it is essential to elicit, select and implement ideas from those who have experience to those who will be affected. The most effective course of action would be to continually revise and improve potential limitations in an existing curriculum.

### **Philosophy, Aims, Goals and Objectives**

To improve a curriculum that other schools in Japan may wish to emulate, it is important to discuss the philosophy, aims, goals and objectives in order to explain the direction of a language program. First, a philosophical foundation is essential because it provides a general framework for curriculum developers to, "answer what schools are for, what subjects are of value, how students learn, and what methods and materials to use" (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.31). Second, the aims of a language program are important to discuss because, "Aims depict a general sense of direction for the curriculum" (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.273). Third, goals should be outlined to focus on what students, "should accomplish in terms of learning as a result of a particular subject or educational program" (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.276). Lastly, the objectives should be addressed because they are, "specific statements that indicate either general or specific outcomes" (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.289). By focusing on these elements, an existing curriculum can become gradually more centered towards the needs of the students.

### **First Year Language Curriculum**

When introducing the first year curriculum to program administrators, we would begin by stating that the department had chosen the philosophy of Essentialism for first year students in order to focus on the essential language skills. As a result, the general aim of this philosophy would be to, "promote the intellectual growth of the individual" before advancing the second year (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.55). To accomplish this aim, however, the goal of the language skill courses would be outlined while the objectives of each particular course would explicitly express the specific requirements students would

need to satisfy in order to pass and advance to next semester or academic year.

In the case of enhancing the basic abilities, the goal would be for students to test into, register, and pass at least two appropriate level speaking and listening courses and two reading and writing courses. For instance, the objectives for the first semester course would require students to demonstrate competent knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and conversational strategies through tests and quizzes as well as through individual interviews with the instructor. When these objectives are met, students could advance to the second semester courses of the first year. Since, by this time students are usually familiar with their new academic setting, to promote further confidence, in small groups students would be required to create and perform short skits in front of their peers using the vocabulary, grammar and conversational strategies introduced in that semester. Similarly, with regard to reading and writing skills, the objectives for the first semester course would require students to read, comprehend and write paragraphs using multiple verb tenses, while the second semester course objectives would expand students writing of three to five paragraph essays. When the second semester objectives are met for all courses, students should be knowledgeable and competent in using their language basic skills.

### **Internet Use for the First Year Curriculum**

There are studies that suggest the resources of the Internet can also be used to nurture the input, output and noticing factors of language learning for this first year curriculum. For example, online discussion boards and chat rooms may make learning more enjoyable because students can comfortably produce output and receive input without feeling inhibited through face to face communication. In the article, "Confidence and competition online: ESL student perspectives on web-based discussion in the classroom," author Paige D. Ware designed a study to investigate how students benefited from on-line writing using web-based discussion boards and chat rooms. In the study, 14 students were required to write online on threaded discussion boards on a weekly basis as well as participate in three separate real-time chat sessions which focused on in-class discussion topics. Transcripts of these chat sessions were then printed out for the students so they could later examine their turn-taking, syntax, transitions and vocabulary. After six weeks, three Chinese students were interviewed concerning the chat-sessions.

One participant named Alex viewed the exercises as a basic requirement that needed to be completed in order to pass the course. However, the second participant, Carol, was able to produce productive output because she viewed the chat exercises as a fun debate among her classmates. The third participant, Emma, was able to receive productive input

because she viewed the chat discussions as a way to compare her writing with her classmates. She stated, “it’s helpful to read other classmates’ responses. I can learn from them. And I can see their writing and compare it with me” (Ware, 2004, p.460). Both Alex and Emma expressed that they didn’t have to worry about their accents or turns to talk while Carol expressed that the web-based discussions were more suitable and open to constructive criticism because face to face peer review was difficult for her in all-Chinese groups.

Another benefit of chat rooms is that they may be a useful means to help learners take notice of their use of English as a kind of form focused instruction. In the article, “The Use of Chat Rooms in an ESL setting”, author Yi Yuan met two staff members from a National University in Singapore in an on-line context for one hour and discussed a wide variety of topics over a 10 week period. After each chat session, the contents of the chat session were printed out and language mistakes were identified and underlined by the researcher. Later in the week, the researcher and staff members met face to face. At this time, staff members were invited to examine the linguistic problems the researcher had underlined and, if possible, repair them.

The results from the study show that the two participants varied in their ability to notice and repair linguistic mistakes identified from their on-line chat sessions. For example, participants made a total of 154 mistakes with regard to the use of nouns and articles but were only able to identify and repair four or 2.6 percent of those errors. However, with regard to word form or word selections, 13 out of 76 or 17.11 percent of the errors were repaired. In addition, Yuan also reported, “It is very encouraging to know from conversations with the two staff members and their written feedback on the consultation at the end of the program, that they found the on-line chat room activities helpful and fun” (Yuan, 2003, p.198). Yuan states that on-line learning can enhance development in language learning because, “When learners noticed the linguistic forms they have learned in the classroom in the real language situation such as an on-line chat room, they can convert their inputs into intake, thus making language acquisition possible” (Yuan, 2003, p.205). As a result, Yuan recommends that on-line learning programs be implemented within language learning programs so that learners can practice and refine their language skills.

### **Second Year Language Curriculum**

When introducing the second year curriculum, we would emphasize the philosophy of Progressivism for the second year students, “to promote democratic social living” (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.44). Therefore, the general aim of this philosophy would be to teach

students problem-solving skills in order to challenge them, “how to think and not what to think” (Orstein & Hunkins, 2004, p.44). As a result, the goal from this aim would not be to have students register and continue in skills courses that they should have mastered, but rather to have them enroll in content classes that challenge them to employ their English skills beyond basic communication. Therefore, the objectives of the second year courses should be those specifically designed to generate student initiative.

Colleges and universities offer a variety of content courses taught in the target language. Instead of passively receiving content, students could be challenged to think using the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills they learned the previous year. In the case of an American Culture course, for example, students for the first semester of the second year (or higher) could be required in pairs to research the history and background of a particular issue of American Culture, such as universal health care, and with their partner create an oral power-point presentation in English. For the following semester or academic year, students could enroll in an International Studies course where individuals would be assigned to investigate a troubling issue such as global warming, AIDS or poverty and express possible solutions in a speech delivered in English in front of their peers. In both semesters, in addition to satisfying the specific linguistic, content, and presentation objectives outlined by the instructor, students would be challenged to think for themselves and propose creative solutions.

### **Internet Use for the Second Year Curriculum**

In addition to the practices utilized in the traditional classroom, there is research which suggests that the resources of the Internet may also be used to for this type of curriculum. Specifically, chat rooms and e-mail may provide and afford learners with more autonomy and or identity than may be available in their immediate environment. For example, in the article, “L2 Literacy, and the design of self: A case study of a teenager writing on the Internet,” Author Wan Shun Eva Lam, encountered one ESL student whose ability to write English had improved dramatically over one year’s time. As a result, Lam wanted to learn how this student was learning English through the Internet. Lam discovered that her subject was not very confident about his current linguistic ability. However, after the student established relationships via e-mail and real-time chat room with students around the world, he became much more confident and adept at expressing himself in English. Lam attributes her participant’s improvement in English to his creation and involvement with on-line communities which made him feel comfortable. Specifically, he was able to communicate with members of the opposite sex which he found to be encouraging and easier to talk to than compared to other males at his university. “Female pen-pals take on a nurturing, motherly, supportive role” (Lam 2000, p.472). The participant crossed

gender lines and took “on the nurturing, supportive voice usually associated with female identity” (Lam, 2000, p.474). As a result, Lam concludes the article by urging instructors and teachers of TESOL to reconsider the significance of L2 identity in writing and reading and that the use of computers to construct new identities via the World Wide Web can be a valuable asset to develop English proficiency.

### **Teaching Philosophy and the Internet**

We have reviewed studies which have examined the benefits of discussion boards, chat rooms and e-mail as a means to enhance learners input, output, form focused instruction and autonomy and or identity. However, there may be some debate as to how motivated second language learners may be using ESL websites on the internet. In the article, “Students’ Perceptions of English Learning through ESL/EFL Websites”, authors Shiao-Chuan Kung and Tun-Whei Chuo investigated students’ use of websites for supplemental language instruction. In particular, students were introduced to popular ESL websites such as Activities for ESL Students, Interesting Things for ESL Students, Fluency through Fables, Dave’s ESL Cafe, and Randall’s ESL Cyber Listening Lab. Overall, Kung and Chuo found that:

Students’ attitude towards self-learning is somewhat passive. They found this supplemental mode of learning interesting and wanted more recommended sites, but are not likely to visit these sites on their own unless they are told what to do with the information on the sites. The results of this study did not seem to confirm Meloni’s (1998) claim that the medium increased students’ motivation.

(Kung & Chuo, 2002, p.8)

In fact, in a follow-up study conducted a year later, Kung and Chuo found that “students do not currently access ESL websites on their own because they believe they do not have time and there are more convenient media that they can use to learn English” (Kung & Chuo, 2005, p.10). As a result, Kung and Chuo emphasize the importance of guiding students through the websites on the Internet.

As a result, while there are studies that indicate that ESL students may benefit linguistically by participating in resources such as chat rooms, discussion boards and e-mail, students may need more assistance and guidance when it comes to utilizing ESL websites. Personal experience guiding ESL students through these websites reflects this as well. Kern (2006) in researching perspectives on technology in learning and teaching languages states:

Because the dynamics of interaction in online environments differ from those in face-to-face interaction, teachers must be prepared for new way of structuring tasks, establishing exchanges, guiding and monitoring interaction, and evaluating performance, not to mention mastering the relevant computer applications.

(Kern, 2006, pp.200–201).

Therefore, when students are learning how to use ESL websites, instructors should perhaps design their lessons in a way so that learners may want to access those resources own their own in the future. For example, instructors could begin by highlighting form focused instruction supported by Essentialism. Students would be guided through a research session on the computer to promote intellectual growth and reinforcement, while incorporating a review of basic language tools. Once students gain confidence with technological resources, the focus naturally shifts to Progressivism, where students can experiment with chat rooms and Email pen pals in order to adapt and prepare for a changing global environment.

### **Discussion**

Of course, both philosophies may have their limitations. In theory, employing Essentialism as an educational philosophy may help the first year language students establish a stronger academic foundation before advancing to the next level of their education. However, this does not necessarily deem it a perfect paradigm or fit for the department and or instructors of a particular institution. For instance, one principle of this philosophy with which we disagree is that, “teachers have complete authority” and “students’ input is not sought” (Beglar p.13). Of course, instructors should be knowledgeable and competent; however, from time to time students should have the opportunity to employ their abilities by conducting alternative activities. Likewise, Progressivism as an educational philosophy may not always be suitable. For instance, it is possible that although students have mastered basic language skills in the first year, they may not be comfortable sharing or expressing their thoughts and ideas in second year group activities. Also, this type of teaching style of guiding rather than informing students may be a new or uncomfortable practice for some instructors.

Nevertheless, since a great deal of students who enter language programs in higher education may lack fundamental academic skills, it seems appropriate to build or enhance their linguistic abilities before advancing to the next level. During this research, we have noticed several students who are unable to handle content lessons taught in English because their fundamental language skills are not adept. Conversely, we have also had

some advanced students who become bored in class because they have already mastered the basics but enroll in basic language classes in order to accumulate credits for graduation. Their lack of enthusiasm dampens the motivation for the other students who need to take the class. Therefore, a curriculum with an Essentialism philosophy which emphasizes the basics for low level first year students followed by a Progressivism philosophy which challenges second year or advanced students to solve real-life problems may be a good plan to accommodate and prepare students for success after graduation.

As a result, the curriculum that we have described is more vertically oriented due to its sequencing. That is, the previous course provides the foundation for the next semester (or academic year) course. In this way, the students can gradually build upon their background knowledge and enhance their language skills. In addition, this progression also builds students' confidence each term. In the first semester or year, for example, students demonstrate their verbal ability in a private interview. However, by the fourth semester or by the end of the second year, students may deliver an entire speech in front of a large audience.

One weakness of this type of orientation is that there may not be enough continuity or "repeated meetings with any particular piece of knowledge or skill in order to learn it well and in depth" (Beglar, 2007, p.40). However, at present, students have been taking similar courses each semester as a means to accumulate credits for graduation. As a result, there is much content overlap between classes which stagnates students' abilities and interests. The proposed curriculum would reduce this over exposure and motivate students to focus more intently. Therefore, given that the policy of classes meeting once a week is typical for higher education institutions in Japan, by integrating a curriculum focusing on skills first and content second, we as faculty members can enhance our students' abilities and prepare them for life after graduation without having to completely revise or threaten teachers' courses or lessons.

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