MEETING JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LANGUAGE NEEDS: A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM'S TEACHING COMPONENT.

Patricia Savon Meras, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan

Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the findings of the first evaluation conducted to the teaching component of a recently revised English language curriculum in an international Japanese university, which conducts bilingual education for Japanese and international students. The paper has examined: 1) how the teaching component of the English language curriculum meets the students' academic needs; and 2) what has been the response of students and teachers throughout the first year of implementation of the revised curriculum. The findings show results focusing on the reading, writing and vocabulary skills of this component of the curriculum. These have been gathered and analyzed through case study design using the curriculum evaluation framework. In-depth semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted to students and teachers. The author also conducted class observations of the skills that are object of analysis. This qualitative formative evaluation, with some aspects of summative evaluation, is expected to serve as preliminary judgement of the programme's effectiveness throughout its first year. The results show the impact that the vocabulary skill is having on students' reading and writing skills. The new curriculum has been effective in fostering self-learning skills; and class attendance has increased considerably. The findings and discussion made for each of the curriculum components throughout this year are expected to contribute to the collection of necessary data for future changes and adaptations as the graduate needs change together with the society.

***Keywords**:* English, teaching, curriculum, evaluation, Japan, international universities.

Introduction

Japan's higher education has been going through several changes, reforms and ups-and-downs in the past few years. These transformations as well as its outcomes have called the attention of many researchers in the social sciences, education, humanities and even in the economic and industrial sector. Some authors have been concerned with the phenomena of higher education as a dynamic market (Findlay and Tierney, 2010) and issues such as imperialism in higher education and curriculum reform (Progler, 2010). English language education has played an essential role on these reforms through the renewal and update of language programmes.

The following paper examines the teaching component of the English language curriculum in an international Japanese university (hereafter University R). The curriculum that is subject of study in this paper has been revised and implemented in Spring 2011. Thus this constitutes the first evaluation that is being carried out. The paper aims at answering the following research questions:

1. How is the teaching component of the language curriculum meeting the students' academic needs?
2. What has been the response of students and teachers throughout the first year of implementation of the new curriculum?

Thus the objectives are:

1. To examine the objectives of the recently revised Language curriculum at University R.
2. To determine how the teaching component is meeting the students' academic needs.
3. To examine the response of the students and teachers on the new curriculum.

The first two sections of the paper offer a contextual background of the present study. It explains some of the current reforms that are currently taking place in Japanese higher education where internationalization and English education play an essential role. It then continues to some of the most important characteristics of English Language teaching in Japan.

The following sections describe the case that is object of research, the theoretical framework and methodology and finally, the qualitative findings and discussion of this study.

English language teaching in Japan

This section offers some views of one of the central aspects of internationalization of higher education in the Japanese context, which is the constant efforts of revision and improvement of English language programmes in all schools in the country.

Japan is one of the highly industrialized countries of the Asia Pacific region with a long tradition of investment in research and development. Over the past decade, there have been many policy changes in Japanese higher education, including those that promote distinctive universities in a competitive environment, the promotion of science and research, and the incorporation of national universities, which began in 2004 (Arimoto, 2006). Knowledge of English is essential to enter higher education. In Japan as every university, whether national,

private or prefectural, they include English as a subject in its entrance examination (Matsuda, 2000, p. 55; as cited in McKenzie, 2010).

However, there are many aspects concerning English education in Japan that still need to be worked on and improved. Aspinall (2003) summarizes the five major reasons for English Language Teaching (ELT) failure in Japan. The author argues both as to why English education has "failed" and why Japanese speakers of English as a second language (L2) are not good. He adds that any English teacher in Japan would most likely offer one or more of these if asked why Japanese cannot speak English well. These main points are:

> "1) there is a great linguistic disparity between Indo-European language such as English, and Japanese which is an Altaic language; 2) there is a lack of real need for English in a monoglottal society such as Japan; 3) the predominant ELT methodology has been grammar-translation, which is not an effective way to teach communicative skills; 4) the culture of the language classroom in Japan precludes effective language learning; 5) there is an exotic and fashionable image of English which emphasizes entertainment value rather than hard work necessary for effective language learning" (p. 105).

Since it has been found that poor English language ability in Japanese students has its origin in the pre-tertiary level English language education, many efforts and reforms have been made at university level where there are more foreign, native or near native professors. The policies of internationalization are being applied mainly in universities, and it is a two-sided process: bringing more international students to Japan and sending more Japanese students abroad. As Japanese students are exposed to more international environment when enrolling at universities, they are expected to be able to use English in a more meaningful way than they would do while in high school. English is not only a requirement to enter university, but also, most students study the language at some point during their four years at universities. Nearly all tertiary institutions offer foreign language courses, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the most studied course. Although students sometimes have a choice to study other kinds of English classes such as English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes or Business English, EFL is a required subject in most tertiary institutions in Japan. At the international universities, like the one which is subject of study in this research, English courses are a requirement for Japanese students, even though they are enrolled under the "Japanese-based" curriculum. The university that is being studied in this paper carries out bilingual education in each of its majors. Thus,

students not only study Japanese or English language, but also take Japanese or English based subjects.

Poole (2005) analyzes that the nature of English language teaching medium in Japanese colleges corresponds closely to Holliday's description of a worldwide phenomenon he has defined as "Tertiary English and Secondary English Programs" or TESEP (Holliday, 1994; as cited in Poole, 2005). According to the characteristics of these programs they include:

> "1) EFL as part of a wider curriculum and influenced by institutional imperatives; 2) English Language Teaching (ELT) has a role alongside other subjects in socializing students as members of the work community; 3) EFL is but one of the many subjects taught and must work within the parameters and resources that are delimiting factors for all courses; 4) ELT methodology choice is limited by institutional-wide approaches adopted across different subjects, administrators and the Ministry" (p.247).

The author clarifies that though there are certain peculiarities that exist in Japanese ELT at Higher Education Institutions (McVeigh, 2002, pp. 157-158; as cited in Poole, 2005), many of the generalizations that describe the university context of language teaching and learning may in fact be attributes not necessarily unique to the Japanese experience but part of a wider phenomenon of tertiary English programs worldwide. Kubota (1999; as cited in Poole, 2005) has accurately argued that observers need to be more careful in their evaluations of the Japanese context and that there exists an over-emphasis of essentialised "features" of Japanese students in the research literature on English language teaching (ELT). Holliday (1994; as cited in Poole, 2005) points out a similar danger of assuming too much when he argues that '"learner" carries the implication that the only purpose for being in the classroom is to learn, while "student", on the other hand, implies roles and identities outside the classroom'. In the same way, anthropologists have also noted that, for many students at Higher Education Institutions in Japan, classroom learning is in fact not always the main priority and warn that the "western" view of "learner" may not fit with the Japanese model (McVeigh, 1997, Poole, 2003; cited in Poole, 2005).

Thus, when analysing English language teaching and learning in Japan, we must be careful and always bear in mind the specific characteristics of the Japanese context which cannot be generalized. As it was mentioned above, there are still certain limitations in the English language teaching at the high school level in Japan. These focus mainly on the fact that students do not have the opportunity for much output of the language. Furthermore,

students' attitudes towards English are not very positive regarding motivation or the need to learn the language seriously.

Case description: Centre for Language Education and the English programme

The Centre for Language Education is the department in charge of language teaching to all enrolled students at University R. The English programme specifically plays an essential role in accomplishing the set goals of University R, which is to prepare students for leadership roles in the region and the rest of the world. As an international university, it has set internationalization as an institutional priority in order to prepare students to live ad cope in an increasingly diverse and interdependent world. Therefore, when internationalizing the university it is very important that students be given the opportunity to engage with other cultures and be exposed to ways of thinking other than their own. By developing proficiency in a foreign language students can develop cross-cultural competency and become more successful members of their increasingly complex local, national, and international communities. Through foreign language education, students have access to materials and cultures most times not available otherwise and which inform and enrich both their undergraduate experience and postgraduate life (Savon Meras, 2012).

The English programme that is the object of study in this paper, aims at cultivating the English language knowledge and skills that students will need in order to communicate clearly and confidently with their fellow students, participate in lecture courses in English during their programmes of study and use English in their working lives following graduation.

As part of their English language development, students also receive support with test-taking skills and will work to achieve higher scores on standardized tests such as the TOEFL and the TOEIC. These objectives are aiming at solving some of the pressing problems Japanese university students face in their English language learning: confidence in using the language, not only orally but in writing, gaining an academic proficiency of the language in order to take courses in English and improving their TOEIC and TOEFL scores as part of the future requirements in the different jobs graduates will have, especially outside Japan.

In spring 2011, the university implemented a new curriculum that had been carefully revised by all professors and administrators. The language curricula were also revised and implemented. The curriculum reform process was long and involved many members of the programme. The reform went through the following phases: initialization needs analysis,

finalization, introduction, preparation, implementation and evaluation and revision (Berger, 2012).

The new English curriculum aims to develop in students the following skills: speaking and writing confidently and accurately in English; being able to use English to develop their individual interests; to coordinate and/or work with others, especially as members of intercultural teams in which different varieties of English are used; use English in academic and professional contexts to negotiate, to solve problems and to critically evaluate the ideas and opinions of others; develop as autonomous learners who can continue to improve their English language skills throughout their lives (Curriculum proposal, 2011). The curriculum has special focus on production skills (speaking and writing). Thus, in the case of Japanese university students, it is necessary for them to have a solid preparation on input skills (reading and listening) to be able to produce effectively. This is somehow achieved during their high school English language education, but when they come to university, there is a lack of balance between both groups of skills. University teachers find the challenge of having to combine all skills in each class.

The new 2011 curriculum is divided into “Standard track” and “Advanced track” courses (see Appendix C). The Standard track has compulsory courses from Elementary to Upper-intermediate level on the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). This track also has four elective courses which focus mainly on speaking (Discussion and Debate, and English for Business presentations) and academic writing (English project and English for Business writing). In the previous curriculum the number of classes from Elementary to Upper intermediate was less, so the class frequency was also less.

The Advanced track also contains compulsory and elective courses covering the four skills. It also aims at developing more advanced skills such as critical thinking, debate and academic skills. In order to be able to take Advanced track courses, students are required to complete at least two of the Standard track elective courses. This helps assure that students begin the Advanced courses with a better preparation in those skills.

As the curriculum is structured, students (mostly Japanese) who are following the Japanese based curriculum, after completing their Upper Intermediate English language classes, must take up to 20 credits of English content classes (subjects held in English). Thus, one of the most important objectives that the English programme at this university has is the academic preparation of Japanese-based students to take English content subjects after completion of

Upper Intermediate English language course. Some classes are accomplishing this preparation better than others. Currently, there is still some discussion among teachers on how to best meet these academic needs of students. It could be through the implementation of team teaching or through students' auditing some English content classes before they begin taking them. This paper examines the reading and writing classes which prepare students academically for writing their end-of-course reports and essays when they take English content subjects related to their majors at the university.

Theoretical framework: Language curriculum evaluation

Evaluation is defined by Richards et al. (1985; as cited in Brown, 1995) as "the systematic gathering of information for purposes of making decisions". This definition is perhaps too broad. Brown (1995) proposes that evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum, and assess its effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the participants' attitudes within the context of the particular institutions involved. This implies carrying out a summative and formative evaluation (explained in the following section).

The author explains that this definition requires that information not only be gathered but analyzed, and that both should be done systematically. There are also two purposes: the promotion of improvement as well as the assessment of effectiveness. This definition stresses that evaluation is necessarily site-specific in the sense that it must focus on a particular curriculum, and will be affected and bound to the institution which are linked to the programme, whether they be parent-teacher associations, university administration, national or local governments, etc.

More specifically, on qualitative evaluation of language programmes, Patton (1987) defines evaluation as "the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of information about the activities and outcomes of the actual programmes in order for interested persons to make judgments about specific aspects of what the programme is doing and improve the program. This general purpose takes its specific focus from the information needs of primary stakeholders and the decision-making context of the particular programme being evaluated" (p.145).

Numerous models for curriculum development have been proposed in the language teaching literature, especially in the area of English for specific purposes, and some of them have included an evaluation component (Candlin *et al,* 1978; Perry, 1976; Strevens 1977; as cited

in Brown, 1995). With a view to establishing evaluation that is an integral and ongoing part of the English Language Institute (ELI) curriculum at the University of Hawaii, Brown instead adapted the rather elaborate "systematic approach" model developed by Dick Carey (1985).

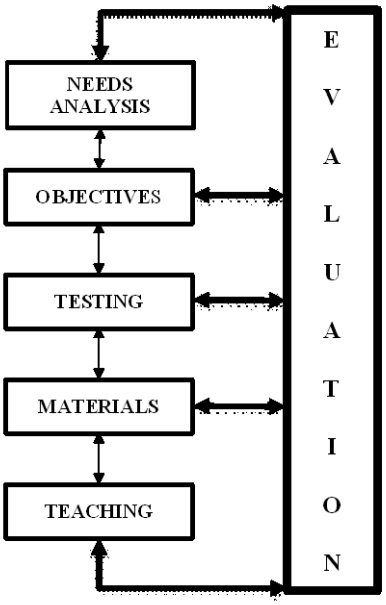

Figure 1: Systematic Approach to Designing and Maintaining Language Curriculum (Brown, 1995).

Figure 1 shows the five components of a language teaching curriculum. It constitutes a framework to design a curriculum as well as to evaluate it formatively and summatively. ***Teaching component:*** when designing the curriculum, the focus of the teaching phase is on the kinds of instruction that will characterize the program, which is on the kinds of teaching that will be required to achieve the goals of the programme (Brown, 1995). When evaluating this component in an ongoing curriculum (as it this paper's aim), I also examined the students' responses and conducted class observations.

Summative and formative evaluation

As defined by Patton (2002), summative evaluations' objective is to render an overall judgment about the effectiveness of a programme, policy, or product for the purpose of saying that the *"evaluand"* (thing being evaluated) is or is not effective and, therefore, should or should not be continued, and has or has not the potential of being generalizable to other situations. The author explains that a summative decision implies a summing-up judgment or a summit (from the mountaintop) decision. Furthermore, the author points out that qualitative data in summative evaluation typically add depth, detail and nuance to quantitative findings,

rendering insights through illuminative case studies and examining individualized outcomes and issues of quality and excellence (Patton, 2002, p. 218).

The other kinds of evaluations, formative evaluations, aim to improve the programme, policy, group of staff (in a personnel evaluation), or product. Formative evaluations' purposes are forming (shaping) the thing being studied. No attempt is made in a formative evaluation to generalize findings beyond the setting in which the evaluation takes place. Formative evaluations rely heavily on process studies, implementation evaluations, case studies, and evaluability assessments. They often rely heavily, even primarily, on qualitative methods. Findings are context specific. In formative evaluation, there is a formal design and the data are collected and/or analyzed, at least in part, by an evaluator. It focuses on ways of improving the effectiveness of a programme, a policy, organization, product or a staff unit (Brown, 1995; Patton, 2002).

Taking into account the above concepts, this paper presents results that apply mainly to a formative evaluation of the teaching component of the curriculum after one year of its revision and implementation. It must be pointed out, however, that the data collected also serve some of the purposes sought in a qualitative summative evaluation such as judging the programme's effectiveness for future revisions.

Methods: Qualitative approach / case study design

The qualitative approach has been chosen, as it has been found as being one distinction of language curriculum evaluation. Qualitative data are generally observations that do not so readily lend themselves to becoming numbers and statistics (Brown, 1995). With regards to qualitative research in education, Merriam (1998) points out that qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting- and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting.

Within this approach we find the case study, which is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, specifically when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case study

inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009).

More specifically, as it is the case in this paper, Patton (1987, 2002) explains the use of case study methodology for evaluation research. “In evaluation, a single program may be a case study. The case study approach to qualitative analysis constitutes a specific way of collecting, organizing and analyzing data, in that sense it represents an analysis process. The purpose is to gather comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information about each case of interest. The analysis process results in a product: a case study. Thus, the term case study can refer to either the process of analysis or the product of analysis or both” (Patton, 2002, p.447).

In this research, systematic, in-depth data collection from different sources has taken place. Within the case study approach, both inductive and deductive analyses have been carried out. Deductive analysis has been done through pre-determined themes and curriculum evaluation frameworks. Inductive analysis is seen through the discussion of the emerging themes after the data were coded.

The data collection took place during the spring semester of 2012. The collection methods used were in-depth, open-ended interviews and class observations (direct observation). The sampling for the interviews consisted of Japanese students who are following the 2011 curriculum (revised curriculum). These students were either on their first, second or third semester. Regardless of the semester, they were all in different levels of English classes. For example, from two students who are in their second semester, one might be taking pre-intermediate English and the other upper-intermediate English or even Advanced English, depending on where they have been placed after taking the placement test upon entering the university.

Most interviews were conducted with one student each in a different session. They lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. Some interviews were conducted with two and three students at a time. Individual and group interviews made a difference not so much in the students’ openness because the students that came in a small group knew each other very well and they were not shy to talk, but rather in their effort to speak more. Once they saw that their

friend answered the question, they would not speak much more. Thus, in some cases, it was necessary to interview one of the students in the group later individually. This aided in the validation of the data. When there was more than one student in the interview room, the interview was conducted as a discussion, where students shared with me and among themselves about their class experiences answering the questions.

Students were given a question guide to answer (see Appendix A). When they were contacted by email, they were explained the content of the interview in detail, and if they agreed, they would come. Following this procedure, they were not given a consent form. So far, all students that have been contacted have agreed to be interviewed. When class observations were conducted, students had the opportunity to meet me, know about my research, the teachers explained to them what the research was about and that they would eventually be contacted for interviews. The questions were previously grouped under the general themes: Reading, Writing and Vocabulary.

This paper presents the data collected from the answers related to reading, writing and vocabulary. This served to evaluate the teaching component of the curriculum according to the framework (Brown, 1995), focusing on these three skills for this paper. The questions were aimed at examining students' preference on reading, writing and listening topics. They were asked to which extent they felt the reading and writing class activities were being useful for their future usage of the English language.

The interviews with the teachers were also in-depth and took place individually. All teachers who were interviewed taught different levels of English. They were previously contacted by email to make an appointment. Then, they were sent in advance the open-ended question-guide for their reference, and also to allow them to prepare themselves to answer. This also provided the opportunity for them to prepare and bring any materials they would like to share to contribute to the research data collection. Before each interview, I gave them two copies of an interview consent form containing the objectives of the research and explanation of ethical issues. Each teacher signed the consent form and kept one copy. The interviews also ranged from 30 to 40 minutes following the question guide. All interviews (teachers and students') were anonymous, audio recorded and transcribed.

In order to answer the research questions proposed in this paper, they were asked two open-ended questions. The first question was aimed at evaluating the teaching component of the curriculum through an analysis of students' most pressing needs and the teachers' in-

classroom experience. They were asked about the most pressing needs of Japanese college students regarding their English language learning in a bilingual international university, where English is not an elective, but required for graduation. The second question was aimed at evaluating how teachers see the changes of the new curriculum in their teaching. Not many teachers were able to answer this question because they were not directly involved in the curriculum revision, nor had taught in the old curriculum.

Regarding class observations, after a careful revision of the online syllabus, I contacted the teachers from each level by email. For the data presented in this paper only writing, reading and vocabulary classes were observed. The vocabulary skill was included in reading and writing classes. In the email message to teachers, I explained the objectives of the research and asked the teacher's permission to come to observe his/her class at their earliest convenience. I explained that the observation should take place preferably when they had no tests. I conducted the observations following an observation guide, which contained main observation points by Brown (1995, p.197) and taking notes as the teacher naturally taught his/her lesson.

Validity and reliability

One of the techniques that has been used in this study for validation is triangulation. "Triangulation entails using more than one method and source of data in the study of social phenomena" (Bryman, 2012). This is the most accurate technique to ensure validity in qualitative research. As most texts on methodology point out, *validity* and *reliability* are concepts of research which mainly apply to quantitative studies. Nevertheless researchers have argued that these concepts can also be found in qualitative studies through different techniques.

The data triangulation was conducted through the above mentioned sources: interviews, observations and document analysis. Furthermore, as I had the contact information of the interviewees, it was possible to email them after each interview to ask for further information and/or clarification on some aspect. This also ensured validity and reliability of the collected data.

Findings and discussion

Examining the teaching component through students, teachers' response and class observations

From the components shown in *Figure 1* for curriculum design and evaluation, this paper examines the teaching component. More specifically, interviews and class observations were conducted to gather data from the reading, writing and vocabulary skills. Thus, as part of the deductive analysis, "Reading", "Writing" and "Vocabulary" were classified as pre-determined evaluation themes on which the interview guide was based. Later, as the transcripts were coded and analyzed in order to answer the research questions, some more specific themes emerged from the data. The teachers' interviews were coded under two pre-determined themes with consequent emerging themes. The emphasis throughout a qualitative evaluation of a programme is to let the participants speak for themselves. The evaluator must present the participants' responses in a cogent manner that integrates the variety of issues recorded during the interviews.

Students' interviews: reading, writing and vocabulary

Under "reading, writing and vocabulary" as pre-determined themes, students were asked about the best ways to improve these abilities and how classes met their English academic needs through these abilities. As the answers were coded, the themes listed and discussed below emerged from the data. *Figure 2* below shows the deduction from the pre-determined themes to the emerging themes.

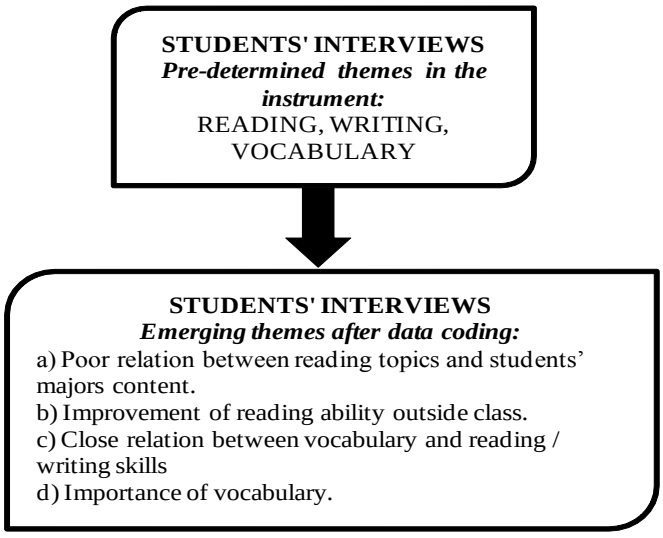

Figure 2: Students' interviews theme analysis.

Emerging themes:

a) Poor relation between reading topics and students' majors content

Students were asked which reading topics they preferred and felt more comfortable with when developing their English reading skills. Most students preferred reading topics that were related to their major. It was found that very few times they had the opportunity of reading topics related to their majors in English classes.

> Student A: "Only sometimes we read about topics related to our major at the university like international relations or environment. I would like to read more topics related to my major in English language classes because sometimes the readings are too easy."
> Student B: "Reading classes have helped me somehow for my English based subjects in the sense of defining topic sentence and supporting sentences, structure in general. Sometimes the reading topics also help in that sometimes they are related to what we study in English content classes."

In order to be able to meet more accurately the students' academic needs in this skill, it would be better if more teachers used in class more reading texts apart from those that appear in textbooks.

Writing has been one of the skills in which students had most difficulty. But with the revision of the curriculum and the increase in class frequency, considerable improvement from the students is visible, especially in Advanced level writing classes. This skill is more developed in the advanced levels, where students get the opportunity to practice different types of writing: comparative essays, reports, literature reviews, and on different topics as well.

> Student C: "In upper intermediate, I learned how to write essays, so it is very helpful for reports in English based classes."
> Student D: "In classes, we have done mainly some academic writing in the form of essays, etc. In advanced classes we learn many good things we haven't learned before, so writing is well taught in terms of how to structure, etc. It's very helpful."
> Student B: "From all English classes, writing classes are the ones that help me more in English based classes because it helps me to write class reports at the end of the course. I can consult my notebooks and I can use the essay writing structure that I learned in class."

This aspect of the teaching component is certainly meeting the students' academic needs, especially for one of the most immediate contexts in which students need good writing skills, which is in their English content classes after completing their Upper Intermediate language level. The development of this skill is a big challenge for all teachers of English at the university level because, as has also been mentioned in the literature on English language education in Japan, Japanese learners of English do not have the opportunity for much production of the English they learn in high school, especially for writing.

b) Improvement of reading ability outside class

Developing learner autonomy is one of the goals the English programme has together with other services the university offers for the students' improvement and practice of English. Throughout these and many other responses of students, it has been found that this goal is slowly being accomplished. Students do feel motivated towards doing more self study, as they have realized that when studying languages, the classroom can only offer them a percentage of their learning experience. Much has to be done through individual study and practice.

> Student E: "Reading as many books as I can is for me the best way to improve my reading ability because it enables me to not only understand what is written in the book but also helps to understand different kinds of texts, like books for writing my reports and exams."
> Student F: "The best way to improve reading is to read a lot by myself. I don't think English classes have helped me to improve my reading ability very much because time in class is limited, so it is better to read by himself."

c) Close relation between vocabulary and reading / writing skills

Regarding the previous abilities the students interviewed made a connection of improvement of their reading ability with the vocabulary they learn. Thus, some students from intermediate levels expressed that their reading ability has not improved much because their vocabulary knowledge is weak. They all agreed on the importance of studying vocabulary, but at the moment, even on higher English levels, the vocabulary they study is not enough for reading comprehension. Some lack of correspondence was found between vocabulary and these two skills. The students in higher levels expressed that they do learn more academic vocabulary in classes as well as readings, but they all agree that there is need for more self study. They ask teachers for extra reading materials to take home and read by themselves

throughout the week, look up the new words in the dictionary and even try to share later in English with the teacher about what they read.

d) Importance of vocabulary

All students who were interviewed expressed how important they think vocabulary is in learning English. They were all very motivated to learn more complex vocabulary in classes, especially vocabulary that can help them in their English content classes. Many expressed that there is still lack of vocabulary practice in classes, so they usually learn by themselves.

> Student G: "Vocabulary is the most important because you need it for everything. In classes, daily life English vocabulary is more useful, it is very important to communicate with foreigners, but I have to study more academic vocabulary sometimes by myself."
> Student H: "For me vocabulary is very important for tests like TOEFL and TOEIC because when I see the words in context then I can infer the meaning or use other similar words."

In the previous curriculum much emphasis was done to the study for the TOEFL and TOEIC tests, so students had the tendency to study English with the main goal of obtaining high scores in these tests. With the new curriculum and the increase of English class frequency, students have learned more about the importance and balance of all English skills. They now see that vocabulary classes as well as self study help them to accomplish both goals: preparation for their English proficiency tests and communication in general.

Teachers' interviews

For the skills being examined in this paper, teachers were asked the following open-ended questions:

1. What were the most pressing problems Japanese students faced in their English learning at this university?
2. What are the visible advantages of the revised curriculum so far?

The content of these questions has been classified into the following pre-determined themes:

1.1. Japanese students' most pressing learning problems.

2.1. revised curriculum advantages.

As the answers were coded, the following themes emerged from the data.

Emerging themes:

a) Lack of confidence

It is found throughout their language learning that students constantly lack confidence in the production of English. The production skills are speaking and writing, and this problem is found in both. Their language ability is very passive.

> Teacher A: "Japanese university students are still beginners in many ways because they come to the university without having ever written nor spoken English. So in this university, as it is a bilingual multicultural environment, Japanese students need to improve their speaking, writing and listening skills, productive skills. Listening is not a productive skill, but they need to improve on this as well. They need more practice on this. Activating the knowledge they already have and getting them to use it in a productive way is the biggest challenge."

It was found that there is a relation between this lack of confidence and students' motivation towards learning English. The fact that they, as Japanese, do not see learning English as something that is needed for their future work at all if they stay in Japan constitutes a hindrance for both teachers and learners. However, as an international university, students have expressed that one of the main reasons they came to study here was to acquire a bilingual education and learn English for their future professional life. English teachers find it a challenge in classes to meet both kinds of language needs: raise motivation among those who aren't motivated towards the language and fully prepare those who have clearer goals about their future with English. The programme administrators must also adapt to these different needs.

b) Few opportunities to use English in a meaningful way

This theme emerged from almost all the interviews. Teachers find that despite being in an international environment and opportunities for practice on campus, students still have very little language practice outside the classroom.

> Teacher B: “Each student has different problems. The most common is their lack of practice and use of English. Teachers try to give them opportunity to use English in class, but since they are all Japanese it might seem unnatural for them to use English with other Japanese classmates. So the main problem and challenge is finding real situations for them to use English and practice. Many of them are very shy and they don’t want to speak. We can always compare it when they have an exchange class with international students, as they can use English in a real situation, they are very motivated.”
>
> Teacher C: “Students may have English classes once or twice a week and that’s all they do. Even in our university students have 3hrs of English 4 times a week. But if they are asked, they’d probably say they don’t use English outside the classroom. They may use it in class ad through homework, etc, but they don’t seem to have enough opportunities to practice. All other things relate to that. This is the main issue.”

Continuous efforts are being made by teachers to successfully meet the students’ needs with the new curriculum. Most teachers, when interviewed, expressed that it is still too early to draw thorough conclusions after the first year of the curriculum implementation, but they have acknowledged that the new curriculum is developing more learner autonomy in students. They also have more classes which means more homework and this certainly helps students in their preparation for English based subjects.

> Teacher D: “One of the good things about 2011 curriculum is that attendance to class is much higher. In 2011 the objectives of the curriculum were revised giving more emphasis to the production of English. In general, we find that students are reaching the objectives better than before. In the previous curriculum, a lot of emphasis was given to TOEFL score and that is a very tough objective for most students. So, in the new one communication and communicative competence is emphasized. Now there is less emphasis on TOEFL. Students achieve the current objectives better than the TOEFL score objective.”

Though this paper only focuses on the reading, writing and vocabulary skills of the teaching component, it should also be mentioned that as part of a more detailed curriculum evaluation that the researcher is carrying out, through interviews, it has been found that most teachers

agree on the fact that the speaking confidence of students is still one of the problems and challenges they face. When asked if they focus their teaching more in preparing students for the future contexts in which they will use English; in targeting their specific linguistic needs as native speakers of Japanese; or both, they mostly answered that their focus is in both. This is a major challenge for English teachers that teach Japanese students. As the literature points out, there are still major problems in Japanese learners of English regarding their attitude towards the language. Many do not see the need of learning English at all. Thus, international universities in Japan, like this one, try to foster Japanese students' motivation toward the language through bilingual education. Thus, students have the opportunity of looking at English as something more than just a tool for daily conversation and "making international friends", but also as a way to expand their horizons academically and in the future job market. As one of the teachers that were interviewed accurately put it:

> Teacher E: "The students' needs might also change because the world is changing. If the university sees that society demands some specific kind of graduate, then they must adjust to those changes. For example in Japan there are great changes of industry and manufactory and many companies are moving to China, Thailand, etc. In that case, of course, they need students that speak English well and the AP languages too. So, shifts in the world might lead to shifts in students' needs."

Class observations

The class observations were also coded into themes which were similar to those in the students' interviews, so that both findings could be triangulated.

A) Use of textbook (as part of class material analysis)

For the reading skill it was found through class observations that most reading practice was done from the texts found in the textbook. These texts contained a lot of vocabulary that students already knew. Therefore students expressed the need of doing further reading practice by themselves as was seen in their interviews. Even so, teachers used other materials in classes like pictures and texts on PowerPoint for students to read and discuss. For writing classes, teachers used mainly materials that were available on the blackboard system for students to consult. There was also textbook use in writing classes. Students read example essays and the guide to write later mainly as homework for submission to the teacher. Topics on textbooks are mainly daily life events and vocabulary, but the teacher

allows students to adapt those to their own reality when they write. For example they are allowed to write essays comparing their majors at the university, or about future jobs, etc.

B) Class structure.

- Teacher's enthusiasm for the lesson and the students' learning was very good. The teachers were in full control of the learning process, they know their students well and establish good communication with them. This is important for students' motivation and class attendance. They see that the teacher cares and is concerned with their learning.
- Teachers combined the reading and writing practice with grammar exercises. Students have sometimes expressed their dislike towards grammar, but have acknowledged that they need more practice of it, so it is certainly a good strategy from teachers to combine this skill with others. This helped to keep a good dynamic in classes and students felt motivated towards the different skills.
- The lessons were well organized. However there was no review of the previous lesson at the beginning of the class, so students were not given much opportunity to do quick reviews of what they had learned and practiced. As it was found through the interviews, one of the pressing problems students face in their English learning is the lack of opportunities to practice outside the class. This means that what students learn in classes is not put into practice immediately, so it is somehow stored and/or "asleep" in their brains. When they come to the next class, this knowledge needs to be activated through at least a quick review of a previous lesson. This serves two main purposes: 1) it gives the opportunity for students to re-connect with English through previous class contents and begin using it again; 2) it makes students aware of the importance of previous learned content and its connection with the new content they will be learning in the present class.
- The general objective of the class was not made clear to the students although they were explained the objective of some exercises in particular. It is recommended that teachers explain the objectives of the lesson, so that students become aware of the importance of learning English and how classes can help them, so that they don't see English classes at the university as just a part of the requirements for credit completion and graduation.

As Japanese students are learning English in a non-100 percent-English speaking environment, it is essential for teachers to create activities in class in which students can use as much English as possible. Thus, no reading, writing or listening class is left

without some speaking practice. During class observations, it was found that there was enough use of English by the students in the classes through the practice of each skill. Students often speak Japanese among themselves in English classes, especially if they are not provided with various speaking activities by the teacher. Thus, it was observed that as teachers brought in the speaking skill in reading and writing classes, students were provided with enough opportunities to practice this skill and use the language more meaningfully. Thus, students are able to realize the importance of having good proficiency in all skills as they all interrelate during language learning.

A) Teaching skills

- The teaching skills of teachers were shown through the variety of activities that motivated students towards learning. These activities included games, reading the text aloud to keep students awake and listening.
- Teachers effectively did a lot of warm-up before reading exercises. This motivated students and effectively prepared them for the coming activity.
- Speaking practice was combined with reading and writing where students had to work in pairs or groups to discuss with their classmates on topics related to the reading in order to develop these topics in writing. This encouraged students to actively use the vocabulary they have been learning in classes. The reading and writing topics were combined with speaking practice in the form of interviews. Students had to interview his/her partner on a topic related to the reading/writing and ask similar questions.
- Some teachers give students a self-evaluation sheet which they have to submit at the end of the class. They have to evaluate themselves in terms of how many times they participated in class, whether they did the homework or not, brought their textbooks. This is a good way of encouraging students to be more responsible inside classes.

All these in-class strategies are working towards an effective and efficient implementation of the new curriculum, especially because as the class frequency in the programme has increased, it becomes more necessary for teachers to find and research ways to keep up students' motivation and improve their performance in order to prepare them for the future usage of the language, the most immediate use being in their English content classes at the university. Thus, it is found that as the teachers implement the revised curriculum, they face constant in-classroom challenges to make it more effective on students' English skills apprehension.

Conclusion

Researchers have pointed out that the purposes of evaluation are development and accountability (Rea-Dickins and Germaine, 1992; as cited in Kiely and Rea-Dickins, 2009). These authors explain that development involves improvement of a programme, not only for future students, but also for current students. They argue that it involves reflection on the learning materials used, changing teaching techniques and strategies, and together with these dimensions of practice, the teacher's own professional learning, especially when the evaluation takes place at the same time as the curriculum is being designed. On the other hand, accountability involves explicit attention to issues that students raise, so that they can see that their situation is being recognized, and also documentation of these processes, so that more remote stakeholders within the institution and beyond can be assured that students are listened to, and that the development of the programme involves active attention to their experiences of learning. This research has taken these criteria into account. Thus, the author has decided to use the in-depth technique of interviews especially for students.

This paper has examined the teaching component of the English language program in an international Japanese university with special focus on the reading, writing and vocabulary skills. When evaluating a curriculum, the researcher must try to gather as much data as possible from different sources. Following its main focus, this paper has presented findings and analysis from interviews, observations and document analysis, especially done during the class observations. In the first section of the paper, an overview and major challenges of English Language Teaching in the Japanese context, specifically at tertiary level was provided. Then, the researcher provided details on the English curriculum that is the object of study of the paper by explaining the revisions that had been made to it in 2011 as well as its main objectives and class structure. The analysis of the collected data was carried out based on Brown's (1995) framework of curriculum design and evaluation; and the case study design. The last section of the paper presented the results and discussion based on the interviews to students and teachers as well as observations of reading, writing and vocabulary classes as part of the teaching component of the curriculum being examined.

From the data collected for the evaluation of these skills, the researcher has concluded that teachers have been able to begin running the revised curriculum successfully. However, even though class frequency, credit completion requirements and attendance has increased and has become more demanding for students, there is still need for more detailed revision on the ways students can use English more meaningfully. Regarding the class content of the

skills examined, students are not required to make as much effort as they would need to learn the language effectively in class. However, teachers do use different in-class strategies and combination of activities to raise students' motivation, so that they are able to continue their language practice outside the classroom. This is being achieved through homework after class and the encouragement of students to develop their self-study skills, which is also one of the main goals of the curriculum. From the three skills being evaluated, reading and vocabulary are the ones in which students have mostly developed self-study skills. This has considerably helped their performance in class.

There is still an ongoing curriculum reform by the English teachers at this university, as they are constantly carrying out a formative evaluation of each of the skills they teach through materials revision and students' performance. This case study of language curriculum evaluation at this university constitutes the first evaluation that takes place after the new curriculum was implemented last year. At the same time, this paper is part of a larger evaluation being carried out by the researcher by collecting data that generates from the other curriculum components shown in the framework.

The university usually carries out a thorough curricula revision every five years. Thus, by then it will be necessary to have enough collected data from the different variables, at least on a yearly basis, in order to perform and implement the next revision and changes respectively. The findings and discussion made for each of the curriculum components throughout this year will contribute to the necessary data for future changes and adaptations as the graduate needs change together with the society.

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Bio-data

Patricia Savon Meras (merasa10@apu.ac.jp) is currently a PhD candidate in Asia Pacific Studies at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan. MSc in Asia Pacific Studies. BA and MA courses in English Language and Literature. Has teaching experience in linguistics, TESOL and Japanese. Has previous publications on Japan's modernization and its higher

education reforms. Research interests include: TESOL, ESL, internationalization of higher education, discourse analysis, East Asian studies, comparative cultural studies.

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Appendix A

Interview questions to students:

A. Reading

1. What do you think is the best way to improve your reading ability?
2. What kind of topics are you interested in?
3. You read about many topics in class. Which topics do you dislike? Why?

B. Vocabulary

1. How important is vocabulary for you?
2. What kind of vocabulary do you think is useful for you?

C. Writing

1. What topics would you like to write about?
2. How do English writing classes help you improve this skill?
3. How do the writing classes help your performance in English based classes at the university?

Appendix B

Interview questions to teachers:

1. What are the most pressing problems Japanese students face in English language learning?
2. What are the visible advantages of the revised curriculum so far?

Appendix C

Table 1: English program overview under 2011 curriculum (Berger, 2012)

(summarized by the researcher)

Track	**Subject titles**	**Credits**	**Skill objectives**
Advanced (Elective)	Extensive reading English project 2 English for business 1 English for business 2	2 2 2 2	Reading 4 skills 4 skills 4 skills
Advanced (Compulsory)	Advanced English 2A Advanced English 2B Advanced English 1A Advanced English 1B	4 2 4 2	Debate, reading, writing Critical thinking, writing Listening, speaking, writing, academic skills Reading, academic skills
Standard (Elective)	English for Business Writing English for Business Presentations English Project 1 Discussion and Debate	2 2 2 2	
Standard (Compulsory)	Upper-Intermediate English A Upper-Intermediate English B Intermediate English A Intermediate English B Pre-Intermediate English A Pre-Intermediate English B Elementary English A Elementary English B	4 2 4 2 4 2 4 2	Listening, speaking, writing Reading Listening, speaking, writing Reading Listening, speaking, writing Reading Grammar, reading, writing Listening, speaking