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ANALYSING THE EFFICACY OF A PROJECT-BASED BUSINESS ENGLISH SKILLS COURSE[1]

ABSTRACT: Increasingly, university students around the world are demanding courses that target vocational skills. This paper outlines the design of an advanced business English skills (ABES) course which aims to introduce students at a private Japanese university to essential English communication skills typically used in a corporate environment. Initially, the authors provide a brief overview of the nature of 'business English' and locate this within a Japanese context. Elements of the ABES course include teaching how to make effective presentations, how to make persuasive proposals, how to pitch ideas, and how to start a business. The efficacy of the course is explored through students' reflections. Finally, the authors provide some keys for educators who wish to design similar courses.

Keywords: business English, course design, practical pedagogy, skills-based approach.

1. Introduction

Students at Japanese universities are becoming increasingly aware that they need to develop their vocational skills if they are to be successful in the highly competitive employment market. Traditionally, Japanese companies would provide weeks, or even months, of in-house training to new employees before they began any substantive work. However, today most companies expect new staff to be productive from the start. This need has been reflected by a

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significant increase in the number of vocational courses offered by Japanese universities.

This paper explicates the design of a business English course which was constructed to develop students' practical business English skills. After briefly clarifying the nature of business English, and how it is used in Japan, the authors discuss the design of the course. The qualities of the course are then evaluated through teacher reflection and student reaction. Finally, a set of keys are provided for educators who might wish to construct courses of a similar nature.

2. Business English

Without doubt English is the *lingua franca* of the business world. University students around the world recognise its necessity for a successful working life. Frendo (2005, p. 7) and others (see Donna, 2001) have successfully addressed the question "What is business English?" One truncated answer to this question might be that business English incorporates everyday English, English that requires a general understanding of the business world, and English that requires specialist knowledge or vocabulary. Typically, business English learners can be grouped into three main categories: (1) *'Pre-experienced'* learners who have little or no knowledge of the business world;

(2) *'Job-experienced'* learners who are working and are looking to learn English related to their individual vocational needs and; (3) *'General business-experienced'* learners who lie between pre-experienced and job-experienced (Frendo, 2005, pp. 1-2) i.e. they have a certain amount of job-related experience and are learning English for a specific reason or for a new position.

Clearly, any student that already has a high level of communicative ability in English will have an advantage at the recruitment stage. If such a graduate also has practical business English skills and a rudimentary knowledge of business, then he/she will be better able to select the company that they want to work for, rather than the other way round. However, to learn business English to the exclusion of learning business skills cannot satisfy the practical needs of a job seeker. It is essential, therefore, that language and business skills be introduced and taught concurrently. In terms of pedagogy, the popular case-method approach (Boyd, 1990; Esteban & Cañado, 2004) offers learners the opportunity to acquire practical business skills and knowledge. Similarly, learning business English through task-based learning (TBL), or problem-based learning (PBL) provides students with controlled exposure to the English they will be expected to use and examples of business situations they will face once

they enter the employment sector. The advanced business English skills course outlined in section 4 was designed with these principles in mind.

3. Business English in Japan

Business leaders in Japan have long been critical of the fact that English teaching in schools and universities has focused on preparing students to pass examinations, and not for practical use. This frustration was particularly keen when Japanese companies were expanding globally in the 1970s and 1980s and could only recruit graduates with basic English skills. Things came to a head in 1979 when senior figures from the Japanese business community had to ask the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to create the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to provide companies with a reliable means of assessing who to hire or promote (Shillaw, 2003).

It was not until 2013 that the Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) finally acknowledged the need to educate "Global Citizens" with good English skills (MEXT, 2013). Since that time, the Japanese government has introduced a number of radical initiatives to improve the teaching of English. These include introducing English in Year 3 of elementary school, developing curricula aligned with the Council of Europe

Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and restructuring the

university entrance exam system (MEXT, 2015). However, MEXT's moves to

revamp the educational curriculum need time to take effect (see Cripps, 2016a).

The reality is that businesses, at least in the short-term, will need to invest in

corporate training schemes which emphasise English and intercultural training.

Global English (2017, para. 7) summarises the current dilemma as follows:

> English language skills in Japan remains stubbornly low, especially
> relative to the education, skills and prosperity of the population in
> general. Despite government efforts to ramp up English language
> competency in preparation for the surge of international visitors
> expected for the Olympics, many believe the official programs will
> fall short. That leaves it to businesses to bridge the gap by investing in
> this key capability for their workforce.

Economic imperatives are shaping employers' demands for graduates

with a high level of communicative English ability. The most famous example

of a Japanese company's call for English use in a corporate setting is that of

Rakuten Inc. On March 1, 2010, Hiroshi Mikitani, the CEO and founder of the

Rakuten online retail company, announced that English would be Rakuten's

official language. The company's 10,000 employees were given an ultimatum –

learn to speak English fluently within two years or face demotion. Considering

the fact that, at that time, a purported 95% of Rakuten's Japanese employees

could not speak English, the announcement understandably came as a

considerable shock to them. This discord was echoed by other Japanese companies such as Honda whose then CEO Takanobu Ito stated that: "It's stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan when the workforce is mainly Japanese" (Kinny, 2018).

However, Rakuten's initiative has proven to be quite successful and influential. Following Rakuten's lead, Honda (after appointing a new CEO) announced publically in its annual sustainability report in July 2015, that by 2020 it would change its official corporate language for international communications within the company to English (Kinny, 2018; Neeley, 2017). By making English its corporate *lingua franca* Honda hopes to improve its international operations and corporate make-up: "By 2020, senior executives will have to prove their English fluency before taking up their positions, and internal documents that need to be in English will be written that way rather than translated from Japanese" (Japan Times, 2015). Rakuten's 'Englishization', as it has been called, has had a significant impact on Japanese university graduates and their prospective employers. This ripple effect is likely to spread as Japan's shrinking population and globalization challenge traditional corporate norms.

4. Course Design

Nanzan University is a private, Catholic university in Nagoya, Japan, with a student body of approximately 10,000. The Department of British and American Studies at Nanzan (*'Eibei'* in Japanese) is well-known for its English programme and the high-level English proficiency of its students. The programme described in this paper, 'Advanced Business English Skills' (ABES), is a popular elective course open to third- and fourth-year students. The course is always fully subscribed, with a maximum of twenty-five students. There are a total of 15 classes, which take place twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday, in the fall semester (third quarter).

It was considered essential that those students who wished to join ABES should have certain requisite English skills and experience. For the ABES course, it was therefore recommended that students should have a TOEIC score of 730 or above, and that they have a genuine interest in developing their business English and their business skills. The departmental syllabus describes the course thus:

❖ This course will be delivered using lectures and practical sessions.

❖ The objective of this course is to introduce students to essential English communication skills typically used in a corporate environment.

❖ Focus will be placed on developing language strategies and practical business skills.

The course aims in the syllabus state that students will:

❖ Gain the necessary language skills to function within an English-speaking business environment.

❖ Develop effective business strategies and techniques required for everyday business communication.

❖ Acquire a working knowledge of contemporary business practices.

Once the aims of the course had been established, the next step was to design its structure. Underpinning the first half of the course was the desire to get the students to consider how to devise business ideas, to recognize the need to work closely with group members, and to learn how to pitch ideas through making effective proposals. To this end, they first had to create groups of between three to five students and then work together to conceive an idea for a new business. Next, they had to consider how they would initiate the business, before going on to plan their business strategy. In the eighth class students were

asked to pitch their business ideas. Initially it was only to be to their teacher, but the presentation was made to their peers at the end of the course.

The ABES course was designed to maximise the opportunities for students to enhance their business English skills and gain some insights into the complexities behind setting up a business. Since no students had previous business experience (save for their part-time jobs), the course was structured in such a way to allow them to develop and present their business ideas in a non-threatening manner. An outline of the course is provided with notes relating to each class.

Table 1: ABES Course Overview

No.	Class theme	Notes
1	Introduction and needs analysis	The various aspects of the course were explained. Students were asked why they chose the course, what experience (if any) they had of doing business and what they wanted to learn.
2	Brainstorming business ideas	Students were asked to make small groups (3-5 students) and to brainstorm their business ideas.
3	Making effective proposals	In this class the focus was on how to make effective proposals and various presentation techniques were taught.
4	Business Simulation	In this class the students and their teacher went to a convenience store on campus. The students were asked to analyse the store's layout, products, and business strategy. They were then asked to state how they would try to improve its profitability.
5	Presentation workshop 1	Various aspects of how to give business presentations were explained and demonstrated.
6	Preparation	All of this class was set aside for the students to prepare for their mini-presentations.
7	Preparation	All of this class was set aside for the students to prepare for their mini-presentations.

8	Mini-presentations	The students were given five minutes to present their business idea to their teacher. Afterwards, they were given feedback on the reality of their business plans.
9	Formulating a business strategy	Students were given information re. how to formulate a business strategy especially with regard to how to conduct a SWOT analysis.
10	Business simulation 2	A second business simulation was scheduled for this class but the students requested more time to prepare for their final presentations.
11	Presentation workshop 2	Students were given advice on how to prepare for and give their final presentations. The class focused on conveying their ideas simply and effectively. This included using tips on using persuasive language and how to respond to questions.
12	Preparation	All of this class was set aside for the students to prepare for their final presentations.
13	Preparation	All of this class was set aside for the students to prepare for their final presentations.
14	Presentations	One group gave their final presentation and they were evaluated by their peers and their teacher.
15	Presentations	Four groups gave their final presentations and they were evaluated by their peers and their teacher.

As can be seen in Table 1, the ABES course is fairly demanding and students had to complete many tasks. It was essential to evaluate the course to see if it had met its objectives, and if students had benefitted from the experience. Reflections from the teacher in charge of the ABES programme, along with student reaction to the course, are discussed below. Students' comments were analysed following a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014).

5. Evaluation

5.1 Teacher reaction

At the end of each ABES class, the teacher in charge reflected on its relative success/failure and the students' reaction to it. Four students who had no interest in studying business English dropped out of the course, but those who completed the course (n=21) were very positive, overall. The teacher noted that students had enjoyed the challenge of trying to come up with a business idea and going through the process of preparing to set up their own business. The teacher also recorded how students had exhibited great enthusiasm for working in groups. They also demonstrated good collaborative skills when faced with the tasks of trying to overcome the challenges of how to get funding for their business, how to overcome legal issues, and how to divide roles and responsibilities.

The business simulation in class four, which involved studying a convenience store on campus and making suggestions to improve its business, proved to be particularly popular. However, the second business simulation which had been originally scheduled for class ten had to be dropped because the students requested more time to work on their group projects. This was not unexpected because time is an inherent problem when working within a quarter

system. Students simply do not have enough time to research and prepare for classes which are only three days apart.

5.2 Student reflections

Student reaction to the course was extremely positive and encouraging. They all enjoyed exploring the details related to setting up a business such as working out financial costs, researching legal issues, and designing their company's logo (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Initial logos for the 'Happi Kids' business project

At the end of the ABES course students submitted a reflective paper on their business project and the course in general. The general nature of the

feedback to the course will be summarised here. The comments below are representative of the positive reaction to the course: pseudonyms have been used for the students' names. *"I learned that in business situations, it is required to speak polite English, suggest realistic proposals, make clear presentations, and show respect to audiences. I was lucky to learn these business skills before I go out in the world"* (Naoko). All students seemed to appreciate the feedback that they were given by their peers and their teacher immediately after their final presentations: *"There was a comment from one of the audience that our presentation was one of the best presentations that he/she has attended. Other members and I were very happy for this comment"* (Yoko).

Despite the positive comments about the course in general, many students seemed to have difficulty formulating a realistic business idea, *"...coming up with a business idea was more difficult than I have imagined.... I could not imagine what kind of business idea will succeed"* (Fune). Again, this is hardly surprising considering the fact that the majority of students had no business experience whatsoever. One common reflective comment was that setting up a business was not easy and using business English was more challenging than they had expected, *"...we learned business English in the class, however it was*

more difficult than I have imagined to use these business English in the presentation" (Jo).

The students' reaction to the course was extremely enthusiastic, despite their difficulties. Many commented that it was "*…unlike any other course at our university."* Below, one student notes how the business simulation which involved examining a convenience store 'Lawson' piqued her interest. *"Before working on my project, I went to LAWSON to see their business strategies. Successful business must have some strengths but they actually had weaknesses as well. Investigating other business helps me think how to attract customers"* (Kyoko).

Both Momo and Kohei enjoyed the experience of creating a new business and realised that it could help them after graduation. *"We had to carefully consider things about our plan, but it was fun to create new business. I am happy to have changed my plan to take this course instead of another class"* (Momo). They, like all of the students, spent a considerable amount of time working out practical aspects of their business such as designing floor plans and flyers for their 'Teenplaza' project (Figure 2).
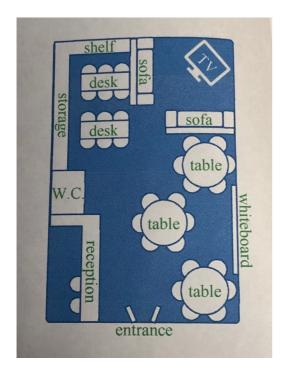
Figure 2: Floor plan and flyer for the Teenplaza project

"I learned how to do business and a lot of important things to go out into the world thanks to this course" (Kohei). Comments such as these are extremely gratifying, but it is important to continue refining the ABES course to make it more effective.

6. Future Improvements

Assessing the efficacy of a course is difficult no matter what assessment criteria are used. Triangulation can serve to create a representative snapshot of the short-term efficacy of a course through test scores, presentations, interviews and self-evaluation, however, the long-term efficacy of a course is more difficult

to judge. Miles' (2018) research on the relevance of learning presentation skills is a testament to this. Arguably, for the students who take a business skills course the only important measure of effectiveness is if they think the course has been beneficial. When designing and refining their courses teachers should consider contacting graduates who have taken their courses in order to gauge their long-term effectiveness.

Ojanperä (2014) conducted a lengthy study on the effects of using business English in business communication in a Japanese-based multinational company. His research yielded two main findings (pp. 77-87):

> (1) English language skills can contribute to better job performance and promotion in Japanese-based multinational corporations. Employees with English language skills seem to have better chances for promotion and overseas assignments, and have wider career choices. On the other hand, using English can make communication slow, cause misunderstanding, create frustration and create barriers for employees with poor language skills. (2) Company strategy has an essential role in supporting effective business communication in English. Not only can the company choose the right language policy, but it can enhance effective use of English, by creating an encouraging atmosphere and offering its employees opportunities to use and practise English language skills.

Considering Ojanperä's (2014) results, it is imperative that educators and their institutions work closely with local companies, such as Honda, to determine what vocational skills graduates need to learn. Each company has to

consider its own language policy and its respective employee support structure. In addition, companies should understand that language learning should not be regarded in isolation. Employees also need cultural training in order to compete in the global business environment. English should not be seen as a 'one-way street'. As employees become more adept at using English this could result in the exporting of Japanese business culture through English, as in Rakuten's case.

With the above in mind, the authors have identified five improvements which could be made to the ABES course and woven into its fabric:

(1) Contact and survey graduates of Nanzan University and ask them about their specific vocational needs (see Miles, 2018).

(2) Contact and survey local and national employers which employ Nanzan University graduates in order to determine the vocational skills needed at their companies.

(3) Create a structure that allows prospective employers to both observe students' presentations and to give feedback on their business English skills.

(4) Create a service-learning structure, such as internships, which will allow students to experience jobs first-hand while they are still at university (see O'Connell & Cripps, 2015, 2016).

(5) Create a system which encourages graduate students to return to the university to give feedback to both teachers and students regarding the vocational skills needed in the corporate world.

If implemented, the above improvements should result in improvements in the short-term and long-term efficacy of the course. English language educators need to constantly assess and refine the courses they offer if Japanese universities want to graduate students with the business English skills that many will most likely need in their future careers (Cripps, 2016b).

7. Keys to Business Course Development

Based upon the ABES experience and on our experience of teaching business courses in Japan (Cripps) and in Hong Kong (Shillaw), we present five 'keys' for constructing business English courses and which can also help develop students' business skills. Admittedly, no set of 'keys' can comprehensively encapsulate the wide spectrum of all business English courses and business skills courses. However, we believe that the keys outlined below

can provide a useful framework for educators involved in business course design.

7.1. Know your students' needs

In a university context, teachers rarely know who their students are before the first class of the semester. Furthermore, students do not always take courses they are interested in, but they may join a course simply to get a credit, or to fill a 'hole' in their schedule. Thus, in the first class of a course it is imperative to spell out very clearly the goals of the course, its structure, the assignments and evaluation criteria. In addition, teachers should be candid about their expectations of the students, such as the need for active participation and cooperation with classmates. It is also useful to ascertain through a simple needs analysis form what the students' expectations are, what their English learning history is, whether they have any business experience, and what they consider their strengths and weakness are in terms of business English and business skills. Put simply, conducting a needs analysis is vital for the success of any course (see Martins, 2017).

As mentioned in section 4, ABES is extremely popular and always starts with the maximum number of twenty-five students in attendance. However,

students might drop out because they have failed to understand the goals of the course, or have not appreciated the amount of work they will be expected to do. Therefore, to help reduce ambiguity or false expectations that they may have, at the end of the first class the students should have the opportunity to ask as many questions as they want about the course.

'Knowing your students' does not start and end on day one of the course. It should be a continuous process through observing students, talking with them, and providing opportunities for them to give feedback about the course throughout its duration. Of course, this process is not mutually exclusive to business English courses, but a course that demands much of the students warrants extra care on the part of the teacher.

7.2. Identify key vocational skills

Having taught in Japan for more than a combined 55 years, the authors are very much aware of the strengths and weakness of Japanese university students with regards to English and vocational skills. Generally speaking, when it comes to vocational skills our students are also aware of the areas they need to improve. Typical examples mentioned by students are: poor presentation skills, lack of business vocabulary (in both languages), lack of confidence, no

knowledge of business, and lack of creativity. Throughout any business English course which aims to enhance vocational skills the teacher should design each class to focus on one or more of these areas of improvement. In parallel to this, the teacher should also aim to improve the strengths of their students. For Japanese students, one palpable strength is their ability to work well in groups. Thus, group projects and presentations seem to be extremely effective in a Japanese university context.

Many of the ABES students, like other Japanese university students, believe that they need to 'conform' to a corporate norm when applying for a job, and when joining a company after graduation. In reality, the stereotype of Japanese companies valuing tradition over innovation and creativity, is no longer valid. To help students understand the changing nature of work and employment in Japan, an underlying feature of the ABES course is to challenge the students to think about the importance of creativity and the need to 'think outside the box' in a corporate world. A willingness for employees to take on leadership roles is now *de rigueur* in many Japanese organisations and the ability to recognize there are alternative solutions to a problem is highly valued. Hence, the incorporation of business simulations and a business project is an important part of the course. In short, educators should identify their students'

needs and cultivate an environment where they can develop these vocational skills.

7.3. Encourage group cooperation

In a collective society such as Japan, group work is one of the keys to creating an effective course. Accordingly, any course that has a group project at its core needs to foster positive group dynamics. Right from the start of such a course, students should be encouraged to take part in pair and group work. Sharing information with peers and utilising mini activities which involve many students, e.g., providing solutions to business problems, seem to work best. To encourage sharing, at the beginning of each ABES class students gave impromptu, two-minute mini-presentations to a partner followed by reciprocal feedback.

7.4. Fostering creativity and encouraging risk taking

In a Japanese context, fostering creativity and encouraging risk taking is often difficult. Japanese society, in tandem with its education system, has so thoroughly conditioned students to select 'the safe way' that they seldom feel comfortable taking risks, or even asking questions of their teachers.

Nevertheless, encouraging students to tap into their creative side, and establishing an environment where risk taking is positively encouraged, can have remarkable effects. To this end, all students who take the ABES course are given A4 pads and coloured pencils at the beginning of the course. Using these simple tools, students are encouraged to visualise their ideas through brainstorming activities such as designing company logos, websites, and advertisements. The students, although reticent at first, soon begin to enjoy experimenting and continue to use the pads throughout the course to express their ideas.

7.5. *Aim to replicate a business environment*

Within a university setting, it is difficult to replicate a business environment. However, the ABES course tries to do this by being strict with students regarding their roles and responsibilities, by insisting on students using 'business English' rather than casual English, by enforcing strict work deadlines, and by introducing a dress code: i.e., wearing suits for business presentations. Other techniques used to create a corporate environment are getting students to create maxims for their company, asking them to list their company policy for employees, and encouraging them to self-discipline 'lazy' (their word choice)

group members. In one group a student had to bring doughnuts for members of his group because he failed to do the work he had promised.

The five keys that we outline above are by no means exhaustive, and there are others which educators might want to consider when creating and teaching business English courses. For example, the British Council (2014) list five tips for teaching business English as: (1) Find out what students really want to achieve; (2) Get a clear idea about the context in which learners use English; (3) Be business-like, but keep energy levels high; (4) Choose your materials wisely and; (5) Be flexible and try to anticipate problems.

Above all, educators should bear in mind that each course is different, as is each class, and each student. Flexibility is encouraged when choosing your keys and approach to teaching business English and business skills.

8. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to illustrate some of the salient stages of course design. Analysing and anticipating the needs of students is a key element of course design. In a vocational course, such as the one outlined in this paper, it is imperative that course designers conduct a needs analysis at the initial stage of course construction. In tandem with this, constant assessment by the course

designers before and at the start of the course, along with continuous feedback from the students will help refine a course in its nascent stages. The advanced business English skills course outlined in this paper is just one example of many business English courses that are being offered at Japanese universities. Each set of students have their own needs and this should be reflected in course design. The keys provided by the authors at the end of this paper can be used by novice and expert educators alike to help develop and improve their own courses. Constant reflection and refinement will help hone any course and lead to increased student satisfaction and effectiveness.

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