

Challenges in Teaching US History to Japanese EFL College Students

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Abstract

English as a medium for instruction within an EFL setting has been gaining popularity around the world over the last few decades. In an attempt to introduce this methodology to students at Kyushu Lutheran College four new classes were added to the Career English Dept. with the goal of increasing students' exposure to academic level English courses. This action research focuses on a United States History class and the unexpected challenges that were observed during the first semester that it was taught. Also, descriptions of solutions to the challenges are given along with justification for the changes made. The teacher's observation notes and questionnaires given to students and casual conversations with them were used in this qualitative research. This paper describes the three most challenging issues and how they were dealt with through action research.

Key words: English as a medium for instruction (EMI), Peer tutoring, Collaborative learning, Cultural differences

Introduction

Beginning in April, 2016 the Career English Department at Kyushu Lutheran College (KLC) English-only classes were added to the existing curriculum. In an attempt to increase exposure to higher level English usage for upper classmen and to introduce structured English as a medium of instruction (EMI) into the curriculum, four courses were introduced at the beginning of the 2016 academic year. These classes were unrelated to teaching English, English pedagogy, or English communication skills.

The four EMI classes, United States History, Global Issues, Introducing Japan in English, and Current US Issues were designed to be completely taught in English and presented with English-only materials. While the new courses were not the first attempt to teach in English, this would be the first time at KLC subjects would be taught in an EMI format that did not instruct students in communication skills.

This paper describes an action research plan that is concerned with the process of designing, teaching, and amending the curriculum of the United States History class. There will be a brief description of the class as well as common definitions of EMI and English for specific purposes (ESP). In defining ESP, the issue of whether or not the course could be considered an ESP course will be discussed. Following the definitions will be discussions of the initial challenges and questions of the course during the first semester it was taught. In the final section, solutions to some of the problems stated will be presented along with analyses of the results.

Course Description and methodology

United States History is designed for junior and senior students at KLC, regardless of the department they may be enrolled in. The class is for one semester and meets once a week (90 minutes each session) for a total of 16 weeks, the last of those sessions being a written final exam. The subject matter is taught as a brief survey course of US History up to 1865ce, and as mentioned above, is taught in only English. The average number of students over the past five years has been 24 (male and female) and consisting of mostly junior and senior Career English majors, although students from both the Psychology and Childcare and Education departments also have enrolled every year.

The English skills of the students are also mixed; a few have been/are rather proficient in terms of English communication, while others would be considered intermediate, and a few had/have little English comprehension.

At the beginning of the first class each semester, the students are asked if they are familiar with certain aspects of historical events and famous persons of the United States. While most students may know who George Washington was, or what the capital of the US is, most seem to be unaware of more than that. The subject matter of the lectures is largely unfamiliar to the majority of the students. This issue will be discussed further on at length.

For this action research results from student questionnaires and interviews were used as well casual conversations with students to identify issues and student needs. Also, final exam scores were analyzed to find common lack of understanding and comprehension levels of the students. Finally, teacher observation was employed to identify any observed change in student understanding/behavior in class.

EMI and ESP: Definitions and considerations

English as a medium of instruction (EMI), according to Deaden and Macaron (2016) is as follows: “EMI is arguably an umbrella term for academic subjects taught through English, one making no direct reference to the aim of improving students’ English. It is a term used across the world and usually in higher academics.” (Deaden & Macaron, 2016, p.456) This is a common concept of EMI and by definition English L2 learning is most often incidental or peripheral.

One of the first issues given consideration when the original syllabus was being designed was whether or not US History, in the way it fit into the curriculum as put forth, could be thought of as an English for specific purposes (ESP) course. Therefore, definitions of ESP were researched.

Carter and Nunan (2001) give a very compact description of ESP as being “[A] course in which the goals, objectives, and contents are matched to the communicative needs [of the learners] are known as ESP ... courses.” (Carter and Nunan, 2001, p. 2) Other researchers have noted that within a syllabus for an ESP course is the necessity for needs analysis; concepts such as what the learners need to master, which skills are most important, and what kind of English will the learners encounter in their future situations for their specific fields. (Richards, 2001; Dudley-Evans, 2001) These concepts seem to give the impression that ESP is basically geared toward L2 learners who need English for possible future jobs (or careers they may be in at present). Another aspect of it is that, traditionally, ESP is mostly made up of adult learners.

Also, according to Richards (2001), compared to a learner who is studying ESL in general, an ESP student is, "...usually studying English in order to carry out a particular role." (Richards, 2001, p. 28)

Given the above definitions, it was concluded that US History would not be considered an ESP or EAP (English for academic purposes) course. However, Dudley-Evans cites Chambers (1980) and states that beyond needs analysis for students, which is imperative for ESP classes, is target situation analysis. Target situation analysis looks at what students will have to do in English, including their skills and the language they will need in order to function acceptably within the class. (Dudley-Evans, 2001) Included in target situation analysis are more detailed analysis of what students' levels of English may be, and what they need.

This area of ESP was found to be helpful in deciding how subject material would be presented to the students. Given that the students' level of English comprehension was varied, including listening and vocabulary skills, it was decided from the beginning of the course that time would be allotted for pre-teaching vocabulary meanings and explanations of what certain phrases meant in certain contexts. Therefore, US History would not be taught or considered as an ESP course. While the students' needs regarding vocabulary comprehension and listening skills would be given extra attention, any needs of what they would require for their future career choice would not be considered as relevant to the subject matter.

Challenges and questions from initial semester

During the first semester that US History was taught several issues arose. The challenges included, as mentioned above, higher level vocabulary and listening comprehension, lack of familiarity with the content, and the average student's previous experience with history classes in their secondary and higher education.

From the first class one issue that became obvious, and should have been taken under more consideration when planning the course initially, was the comprehension level of the students in terms of their English listening skills. Many of the Career English department students had a basic listening comprehension level with regards to everyday conversation; most were able to hold a conversation for ten to fifteen minutes in English. However, given the academic nature of a history class and the contents associated with such, it was noticed that several of the students were only understanding about 60% of what was being said by the teacher. This was discovered by merely asking students questions about what had just been taught, or by requesting opinions from students (although, along with giving personal opinions, the latter is a much more complicated matter when dealing with Japanese students and will not be addressed in this paper).

One example of the difficulty in the higher-level vocabulary being used during the lectures would be words and phrases such as 'federation' and 'confederation'. These had to be explained in greater detail than would be expected if teaching to native English speakers; not only due to language, but because the concepts were not fully understood by the students. Another example of the issue would be the misunderstanding of words such as 'bill' (a potential law) and 'act' (meaning an edict or law). These two words and their uses caused some confusion when it came to listening comprehension.

At the end of the first semester in which the class was taught students were asked what was most difficult about the course. Of those who had enrolled (25 students), 17 had replied that it was

difficult to understand the teacher during lectures. Ten students responded that it would be helpful for the teacher to speak more slowly. Also, a few students, in a more casual setting, commented that perhaps the handouts could contain more detailed writing so that it would be easier to follow the lectures (a majority of handouts for the course were copies of the Power Point slide shows which include written information).

What remained unclear was whether the students were struggling with the lectures due to a lack of listening comprehension skills or if some the vocabulary was not understood, thereby causing the lectures to be too complicated to understand, or both.

Another challenge that was encountered was the students' lack of knowledge concerning U.S. history; neither the events nor the individuals involved in important events seemed to have been familiar to them. After an informal query into the students' background knowledge of US history it was soon discovered almost none of the original 25 students were familiar with the subject material. This was unexpected, as it was thought that most of the students would have at least basic knowledge of certain people from U.S history such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or even Abraham Lincoln. This issue coupled with most of the students not having knowledge regarding American geography nor political institutions created obstacles that regularly occurred during the lectures. In other words, what information that may be given to students in educational institutions from the time they are in elementary school is most often completely foreign to the average Japanese college student. Therefore, expecting students to automatically be aware of individuals and events should not have been taken for granted.

One aspect of this issue, however, was expected: that being the unfamiliarity with the culture of the U.S. during the eras that are covered during the course. This is something with which even U.S. citizens often have trouble. Certain mindsets of the people that were considered the norm during, say, the American Civil War were quite different than what people are accustomed to currently. Since this aspect is a challenge to many teachers in many cultures in regard to historical education, it was expected and planned for.

It was discovered that much of the class time had to be spent explaining who certain individuals were. Also, having to explaining the aspects of the workings of the United States' government ate up more time than was originally expected (this problem also seems to be interconnected with the vocabulary problem that was mentioned above). For example, when speaking about the compromises that had to be made when people were designing the current U.S. Constitution in terms of state power, the students seemed to have been at a complete loss. On the final exam a question was asked regarding a compromise between state and federal power being divided fairly: "Why was the Great Compromise finally accepted by both small and big states?" The number of students who were able to answer at least partially correct was only 3 out of 25, or 12%. Most students were confused as to why states were concerned with their own power, even after explanation during the class.

Another example of this confusion would be the causes of the Civil War, one of which centered around state power versus federal authority. It seems that most of the students had trouble understanding the struggle between states and the federal government of that time and why it was important to the people of the U.S. In a similar question on the final exam; "What were the main causes of the Civil War? Please give details in your answer." Again, most students were unable to answer either correctly or completely. A total of 2 students received full credit for their answers on this question, only 6% of the class. It had become obvious that certain concepts would have to be

explained in more detail or simplified so that the students might understand the events better.

The final issue to be discussed is that of possible cultural differences in how history is taught in North American and European cultures in most secondary school systems versus the way it is commonly taught in secondary schools in Japan. According to Larson, Booth and Matthews (1998), history in most Western cultures is viewed as something that is changing and can rely on more than one source for interpretation. Students are more likely to ask their teachers questions and are also shown methods of historical examination and interpretation. "In brief, English students and history teachers see history as a debatable story of the past ... from a range of sources of historical evidence ..." (Larson, Booth & Matthews, 1998, p.151)

However, in Japan historical information is taught in a way so that certain facts and knowledge can be acquired by the students. Also, most history classes in the secondary education system are taught so that the learned information can be tested, confirming the students' level of learning key information. There is not much interpretation of events, nor is there much time given to discussions and/or questions.

This difference in pedagogical style was painfully evident during the first semester U.S. History was taught at the college. Students were willing to listen and take notes on the lectures. However, when the teacher would ask for opinions or ask students questions their responses were almost non-existent. Another example was when students were asked to make assumptions as to why an event happened, or what effects may occur because of something else that had happened most students were unwilling (or unable?) to give any answer or guesses.

This problem, in particular, became the most challenging one when considering how to engage students more during the lectures. Cultural differences in both how the students were used to being taught and how the teacher preferred to teach could be observed from the beginning of the course. The following section will discuss what and how changes were made to the course and what effects those changes may or may not have caused.

Changes to classroom management and Discussion

The above-mentioned challenges, varied vocabulary and listening skills amongst the students, the lack of familiarity with the subject matter, and the style of teaching the students were accustomed to may seem like separate issues to be dealt with one at a time. However, it was thought, through action research that these issues could be dealt with together. Therefore, the changes to the teaching style discussed below were carried out with the goal of attempting to address all three problems as a whole. It should also be mentioned here that the reasons for the changes discussed in this section were not to increase average scores on exams, but rather to enhance students' understanding and interest in what was being lectured.

During preparation for the second semester the course would be taught it was decided to review lecture notes and Power Point presentations from the previous semester in order to identify vocabulary and events that most students may be unfamiliar with. This first change to the classes themselves was suggested by a colleague to help students understand what was being said. As a result, vocabulary study sheets of words taken directly from the separate lectures were designed and then given to the students to study before the concurrent class. These were then used at the beginning of the classes and briefly explained, as well as answering any questions regarding the

words the students may have had.

Along these same lines, in terms of important individuals that may be discussed during the lectures, those people were briefly introduced to the students in terms of what they did (in relation to what was being studied that day) and why they were important. The students were often asked if they might have heard of certain events and/or individuals before lectures began in order to familiarize them with the contents of up-coming lectures. This seems to have had a positive effect on the students' overall understanding of the lectures; based on more relevant questions being asked and overall test scores on mid-term and final exams.

As mentioned above, the teaching methods in history classes differ somewhat from what the average Japanese student is used to and how it is generally taught in North American culture. Students in Japan often remain passive in class while the teacher lectures. However, during the course being discussed here students are often asked questions directly or asked for their opinions about the subject matter with little or no response given by them. This is still an ongoing issue, though a few solutions have been tried out on the classes since the second year of the course.

Collaborative Learning was also integrated into the curriculum to attempt to enhance understanding of the material. Smith and MacGregor (1992) state, "To learn new information, ideas or skills ... [students] need to integrate ... new material with what they already know." (Smith & MacGregor, 1992, p. 1) They also go on to explain that: "Mutual exploration, meaning-making, and feedback often leads to better understanding on the part of the students ..." (Smith and MacGregor, 1992, p. 2) Within this area, another change was further established for the third year the class was in session.

One subsection of Collaborative Learning is Peer Tutoring. Bradford (2011) tells us that there are a variety of forms that peer tutoring can take; from having older, more experienced students teaching younger, less experienced ones, to students working together in order to learn new skills or information. Learning happens through negotiation of meaning with others within a learning environment. Therefore, along with summaries of certain events and people, the students were asked to research something or someone that would be discussed for an upcoming class in pairs or small groups and then were asked on a random basis to make a brief oral report (1 to 3 minutes) on the subject matter. These reports were meant to aid students in understanding US History a little better by working together to find answers before the information was taught through lectures by the teacher and then discuss what their own group had learned to others.

Approximately half of the classes included up to three different groups reporting on what they researched before the class. Peer tutoring had a positive effect on the class. More students were able to answer questions posed by the teacher during the lectures, there were also more times when students were able to offer guesses as to why something had occurred or what the outcome of a certain event may have been. However, this practice also used more time than was initially planned; how to better make use of time management and efficiency is still being researched.

Another amendment beginning the second year to the classes was breaking the class time into two halves. After approximately forty-five minutes a break time of about five to seven minutes was given to the students. This was to merely give the students a short rest from an all-English environment. However, a second reason was used later on in the semester to justify the break time; to allow students to ask questions of the teacher or peers if they should have any. This second reason was not intended when the break time was first started. However, it became an integral part of the class. At first, one or two students would ask questions regarding something they did not

understand or wanted to confirm on a one-to-one basis with the teacher. Following suit, though, several students began doing the same thing: either asking the teacher or a peer.

Even though it was an accidental consequence, it seems to be one of the more helpful aspects of the class now. Of course, each year the same pattern is repeated; first only a few ask questions, then later it becomes a more widely used approach throughout the semester used by the students.

The average overall test scores over the five year duration the class has been taught has risen slightly year-by-year. Students have been able to now successfully explain why certain documents, revolts, and events took place and then have been able to somewhat extrapolate effects of the events talked about in class. The average score on the final exam in 2016 with a class size of 25 was 70.7%. The following year, 2017, the average was 70.8%. However, from 2018 the average consistently rose from 74.8% to 78% in 2020. These results point to a better understanding by the overall class of the materials being presented in class, and also shows a raised ability in being able to express themselves on higher level short-answer questions.

Conclusion

Teaching EMI in an EFL situation is never an easy task. There are multiple obstacles to overcome, especially when the class is not an English grammar or communication skills course. Vocabulary can prove to be a hinderance to the students' comprehension of the lecture content, as well as difficulties in their listening skills levels. In the case of a subject such as U.S. History, there are also factors such as substantial unfamiliarity with the materials being presented and cultural differences related to classroom teaching methods.

Through this research the challenge of vocabulary comprehension and listening skills was dealt with by providing extra time for the students to become familiar with words they may not know and then working briefly with them during class time to make sure most learners understood. By allowing more time to be spent on unfamiliar aspects of the materials, students showed a slightly better understanding of what was being taught. This practice, as well as the other amendments to classroom methodology, is still being critically looked at to see if further assistance to understanding can be put into practice.

One other solution to students' comprehension of the materials that was instituted was accidental, but proved to be extremely beneficial to both students and the teacher; by offering a break time to students. Several students began to use the break time during class in order to confirm or ask questions about the lectures. This was helpful not only to the students, but also to the teacher so that the questions could direct the teacher to understand what was being missed or not understood by the students, and thereby allowing for amendments to lecture notes and how to better transmit the information to the students.

Of course, problems still continue for the students, and this action research is still undergoing changes and/or additions to classroom management. However, since beginning to take a critical look at how the class is taught, both challenges for the students that were not at first considered and opportunities to increase learner comprehension have had positive effects on the class as a whole.

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