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The English Café and Its Role in Preparing Japanese Nursing Students for Study Abroad



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The purpose of this paper is to share our experience and observations from a short-term, intensive study abroad Seminar in Practical Nursing English. In this program, third-year nursing students from Miyagi University go to Tampere University of Applied Sciences in Finland for two weeks in the summer. The information about how the EFL component of our program evolved is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and the data more qualitative than quantitative in nature. It is hoped that the case study presented here will serve to help other English teachers, especially in terms of English teaching approach and educational design, when preparing their nursing students for overseas study. It is also envisioned that our experiences and lessons learned would be of use to other universities in Japan planning to initiate study abroad programs of their own.

(Keywords: English as a foreign language, foreign language fluency, communicative competence, nursing English, study abroad)

Background: The Recent Global Trend Among Nursing Students

In the past, the prevalent attitude regarding the necessity of English study for our university nursing students was that it should be an elective, not a required subject. The thinking was that nursing students had very little time for English since their major field of study required much time for laboratories, practicums, licensing preparation, and hospital training. Besides, almost all necessary information was available in Japanese. Graduates expected to be working solely in Japan caring for Japanese patients. Therefore, from a practical point of view, nursing students had neither the time nor need for English study.

However, there has been a visible turnaround among nursing students in interest and perceived need concerning English in recent years. When Miyagi University offered a year-long extracurricular English conversation program two years ago, forty to fifty percent of the students who attended regularly were nursing students. In an eight-week, non-credit, special evening class for improving practical English and discussion skills, which was offered last year to students in the colleges of Nursing, Business, Food and Environmental Science, and graduate school, thirty percent of the enrollees were nursing students.

Compared to the business and food-environmental science majors, the percentage of nursing students who took part in overseas study tours and programs

was also notable. Now, incoming students show particular interest in the fields of Disaster Nursing and International Nursing. They express a desire to be able to interact and communicate effectively and fluently with other professionals, scholars, and visitors to Japan. They also welcome and seek opportunities to go abroad for study and observation in order to gain knowledge and skills to bring back to Japan, particularly in the health care field.

Although based on informal observation, one posited reason for the trend is that students naturally wonder about and express an interest in learning from other countries about how to manage and deal with shared social problems and related health care issues such as caring for the elderly in an aging society, the declining childbirth rate and fertility, maternity care, public health systems and policies, group home facilities, and more. In addition, with news about natural and man-made disasters in Japan and around the world made more accessible, immediate, and personal through the internet and modern communication systems, more and more students are aware of and concerned about how to prepare for and respond to community emergencies and relief activities that require international communication and cooperation.

Seminar in Practical Nursing English: Japanese Students Going Abroad

The Seminar in Practical Nursing English (PNE) is a course offered to third-year nursing students at Miyagi University

(MYU). This summer seminar enables them to study abroad for two weeks in August in Finland at the Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK). Students pay their own expenses including tuition, travel, insurance, and housing. Although the first group of PNE students did not go abroad until 2012, groundwork for cooperation and exchange began one to two years earlier. Professors and administrators from the TAMK met with those at MYU to discuss potential and practical aspects of initiating research collaboration and student exchange. The PNE program is one of the resulting programs, which focuses on sending Japanese students to TAMK for short term study where they are accepted as summer school students.

MYU students apply for the PNE program in February before the beginning of the academic year in April. Applicants are considered based on their academic record, TOEIC scores, and English essays in which they give a self-introduction, a self-evaluation of their English ability, and their reasons for wanting to participate in the program. Interviews are also conducted in the selection process, and students are screened for their communicative ability, strength of motivation, and clarity of purpose for participating in the program. Experience, perceived adaptability and receptiveness to different cultural ways of thinking and customs, as gleaned from the written application and interview, are also taken into account. Since each year's group members will be working closely

together on the program, their personalities, individual strengths and weaknesses, and compatibility are also considered. Due to the great amount of time and preparation required of teaching faculty and administrators in both countries for planning, coordinating, and administering the program, the maximum number of accepted applicants has been limited to between six and eight students.

Although the students do not go to Finland until mid-August, the course itself is semester-long and starts at the beginning of the school year in April. In the syllabus, there are sixteen lessons or sessions, with the two-week seminar at TAMK counted as the fifteenth session. The last session takes place after the students return to Japan when they give a final presentation in English about their overseas seminar experience. In the months during the semester from April until before departure in early to mid-August, the students meet weekly for program orientation, pre-departure information, English lessons, special guest lectures, and preparations for their own presentations about nursing in Japan that they will deliver during their study abroad. At present, three MYU nursing professors administer the program by overseeing the students' pre-departure preparations, sharing teaching responsibilities, and staying in contact with the students during their seminar abroad.

While in Finland, students are required to keep a Daily Record of Activities in English about their experiences, observations,

and impressions, which are sent regularly back to MYU teachers. The students work closely under the guidance of the supervising TAMK teacher and attend workshops and classes to learn about nursing education, first-aid, elderly care, palliative care, pregnancy and childbirth, the social welfare and health care system, and the Finnish "neuvola" or maternity and child health clinic. Study tours include visits to a hospice, elderly care homes, hospital maternity wards, and a "neuvola." There is also time in the schedule for cultural experiences, such as a visit to Moominworld and to interact with other international students. The Japanese students stay in an international youth hostel near the university where they can shop and cook for themselves during their stay in Tampere.

Preparatory English Language

Component: Two Approaches Compared

As the course title suggests, one of the main purposes of the program is to give the participating nursing students actual experience in English while learning about different aspects of the field of nursing in another country. It seemed, then, that the first and most important thing that Japanese students would need in preparing for their practical nursing seminar at TAMK would be extensive study of medical English terminology in order to understand the content of their lectures and observational study tours of medical and health facilities in Tampere. Accordingly, in the early years of the PNE program, the

preparatory classes in Japan focused on health-care related English vocabulary study and pronunciation along with comparative literature research about the health care systems in Japan and Finland, and practical pre-departure information sessions. In other words, the preparation was very technical and oriented towards the nursing specialty. The English lesson content and materials were selected primarily from English for specific purposes (ESP) textbooks for nursing students.

In 2015, a new strand of English speaking support classes was added in conjunction with the already existing ESP and pre-departure preparation classes. These additional classes, which were taught by a native speaker of English, were held weekly and supplemented the original course syllabus. The following is a description of two different teaching approaches that were employed in two consecutive years for this new strand of classes. Although the evidence is qualitative and anecdotal, the results provide an interesting point of discussion for English teaching and future program planning and consideration.

Year 1: Focus on language structure and accuracy

In the first year of the new strand, the focus of the weekly lessons was on language structure and presentation preparation. From the results of error analysis, students received feedback and correction hints on their written scripts for their presentations

which introduced the Japanese nursing system. They would then reflect on and correct their errors, rewrite their presentation scripts, and practice delivering their presentations. They also received coaching on pronunciation and presentation style.

Further speaking activities were based on communicative pattern practice, for example, in the form of information gaps or communicative games. The activities were structured and content was pre-determined. Students had remarked in the past that they could not respond quickly enough in conversation since they often felt at a loss for knowing what to say next. It was reasoned that giving students study in vocabulary and language structures, and providing them with the “what” through practice and repetition would give them the experience and confidence in knowing “what to say” when they went abroad for their PNE seminar. Further, the students seemed to appreciate the structure and security of knowing which language targets were to be the focus of practice.

Year 2: Focus on interpersonal communication skills and fluency

The following year, however, an entirely different approach was taken. Very little attention was given to “correct” grammatical language structure and pattern practice. Rather, adequately intelligible utterances and timely transmission of ideas were the goals. It was reasoned that the Japanese students would be interacting mainly with other teachers and students who, like our

students, would be speakers of English as a foreign language. The main purpose and focus of our nursing students' communication was for academic and cultural exchange during their short term of study in Finland.

A special lecture by the director of the Finnish Institute in Japan was introduced in the pre-departure course syllabus. The lecture, given in English, on Finnish culture and identity included an overview of the country and its people through education, special events, customs, and social welfare and health care systems. Afterwards, students were given the opportunity to ask questions. Follow-up reflection essays for the special lecture were also written by the students to further reinforce and enhance learning. Teacher feedback on the essays focused on the content of students' thoughts and impressions. As for grammar, only major errors that interfered with understanding were given attention.

Students were still requested to prepare presentations to introduce the Japanese nursing system when they went to TAMK. They had the opportunity to hear the experiences of students from previous years and were surprised when advised to "relax, don't worry," "don't take it too seriously," and "just enjoy the experience." These comments reflect the senior students' observations about the differences in sensibility, manner, and culture between Japan and Finland.

The English Café

As noted earlier, students seemed to

appreciate the security that a grammatical syllabus offered in that they could know what language pattern or phrases they were expected to produce; yet if English lessons focused too much on structurally accurate responses, the students became very self-conscious and fluency decreased to such a degree that communication sometimes broke down or ceased altogether. Most notably, the wait time for a response was problematic. In the real communication situations that they would be faced with during their practical seminar in Finland, rapid and smooth exchange of ideas was essential.

With this shift in focus, students in Year 2 of the new speaking strand now met weekly to either plan or host cross-cultural exchange events called "English Café," which were held once or twice per month. The PNE students were in charge of event planning and leading the activities during these English Cafés. They planned and prepared games and entertainment for the party, welcomed guests, and explained the rules or instructions of the activities. Non-Japanese local residents and university international students, as well as other Japanese students and, sometimes, teachers participated in the English Cafés and, on occasion, in the planning sessions. In this way, PNE students received real communication practice not only in language structure and forms (grammatical competence), but also in social language skills (sociolinguistic competence) and communication strategies as they hosted and led the English Café events.

For example, if someone did not understand the rules of play before the ice-breaker game, the PNE student leading the activity had to think of ways to rephrase or simplify the explanation to make it understandable to participants (strategic competence). International students who took part in the English Café also served naturally as English conversation partners for the PNE students. Japanese students were sometimes able to give advice and help to the international students for questions and problems concerning campus life and Japan culture and customs. Discussion content was unscripted and spontaneous. Rather than focusing on *what* language structure or pattern to use, PNE students had to think about *how* to communicate most efficiently and effectively. In the course of their spontaneous conversation exchanges, they also had to understand the intent or purpose — the *why* — of the interlocutor's utterance (discourse competence). In the English Café, students were not focused on studying English per se, but rather on successfully negotiating real communicative interchange in English as they met new acquaintances and sometimes even made lasting friendships. After each Café, the PNE students were requested to write reflection papers about their role and activity or performance in the Café event.

After the English Café experiences and activities, we observed that the students' confidence in using English as a medium for communication had increased. They maintained more eye contact when

speaking with others and appeared more at ease when using English for communication. Additionally, they showed continued interest in participating in international events for meeting new people and learning about other countries and cultures. We also observed the presence of a lasting sense of community among the English Café members and participants.

Observations and Discussion

After Year 2 of the new strand of speaking support classes was introduced, a meeting was held among the supervising teachers of both visiting and hosting universities. At this meeting, the head teacher of the hosting institution opened with the comment that the recent group of students on the program was more proactive in that they were more willing to speak and take initiative. Compared to their predecessors, they were able to express their thoughts and requests more openly and with less hesitation. In other words, they were more willing to negotiate meaning. Previously, students had a tendency to make one or two attempts to express their ideas in English, but then would at times lose confidence and give up if asked for more clarification. From the feedback we received at the teachers meeting, we were greatly encouraged to continue with the changes we had made in the supporting speaking classes to shift our focus beyond vocabulary and language structure.

The positive feedback regarding our

change in approach and focus also reflects the changing trend in university nursing programs and students' interests towards incorporating more global-oriented liberal arts education that recognizes the need for communication skills. Although students are expected to be knowledgeable in the nursing specialty, they are increasingly faced with the challenge of having to deal with illnesses and diseases that have no boundaries. More and more, students must be both specialists and generalists. Nowadays, good medical practitioners do not just treat a specific ailing body part or organ. They must also examine and take into consideration the entire organism, the patient, as a whole person in order to make an accurate diagnosis and prescribe proper treatment. To do this, good communication is essential between healthcare-giver and patient. The doctor or nurse must communicate effectively in order to get information to be able to evaluate the entirety of the patient's physical condition as well as lifestyle factors that could have caused the illness. Good communication skills are also needed in order to help patients understand the importance of taking prescribed medication properly. Without such understanding, patient compliance and successful treatment may not occur.

We felt that the English Café events and activities provided the students with the practice they needed to develop all the components of Canale and Swain's four-point model of communicative competence, that is, the grammatical (following the rules

of language structure), the sociolinguistic (using language appropriately in social context), strategic (navigating communication barriers and breakdowns) (Canale and Swain, 1980), and discourse (understanding how the parts contribute to the whole meaning) (Canale, 1983). As noted by Hymes (1971, p. 278), there are "rules of language use without which the rules of grammar are useless." Widdowson (1978) also distinguished between "usage" or "knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language" (p.3), and "use" or "the ability to use the language for communicative purposes" (p. 15). The English Café served well as a natural and sustainable method for building communicative competence and developing skills in language use, especially beyond grammar, in an enjoyable way while experiencing interpersonal cross-cultural exchange and learning about the world around them in a memorable way. The communication skills that the students gained from the English Café would serve them well not only in their study abroad seminar in Finland, but also in their future careers when communicating with patients and clients

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the information in this paper, based on observations, faculty comments, and student feedback, is intended to describe our experience in utilizing the English Café to equip students with the communicative skills they need for short-term study

abroad. Although we are still in the process of ongoing change and improvement, the past experience has been invaluable in serving as a compass to point us in the right direction for our ongoing efforts to help students develop confidence and communicative competence for interacting with others in new and unfamiliar situations.

Preparing for and conducting English Café events requires interest and willingness on the part of the students, and some event planning and organizational skill and experience on the part of the teacher. As the participants become more familiar with the events from repeated participation, set-up and conducting the Café will also become smoother and more routine as members learn how to work together as a team. The English Café builds bridges for student life and peer support by fostering natural cross-cultural communication between Japanese and international students. Most of all, it promotes the development of students' communication and interpersonal skills which they can use in their future wherever they may go.

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