

The Development of the English III (Freshman English) Basic Conversation Program

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Introduction

The English III (Freshman English) Basic Conversation Program (academic year 1994~1995) of the Department of English, Dokkyo University is a coordinated program of 10 first-year classes under the auspices of the Comprehensive English Sub-Committee (Kyoyo Eigo Uneiinkai: Toitsu Puroguramu Han), which also carries the responsibility of overseeing the English I (Freshman English) Reading Program.

In the present program, freshmen students in the Department of English are exposed to spoken English for 90 minutes a week, through video, pair and group work, and interaction with a native English-speaking instructor with the stated purpose of the development of a level of communicative competence in accordance with the overall goals of the four-year English language program.

This paper will follow the development of the English III Basic Conversation Program, from its initial planning stages over four years ago, to the program we have today — why and how it began, the initial goals and how these goals were to be met, the factors that played a part in the evolution/fine-tuning of these goals and the methodology/approach and techniques used, and perhaps, most importantly, the rationale or reasoning behind each of these. This paper is especially intended for those educators

interested in curriculum development, and just how a program such as this is conceived, planned and implemented.

In the Beginning...

As of the 1990~1991 academic year, oral English (“conversation”) classes for first-year students in the Department of English were 45-minute, once-a-week lessons taught by native-speakers of English. The average class had a size of 50-plus students. These oral English classes were supplementary to the 90-minute, once-a-week L.L. (language laboratory) classes, and were in fact part of the L.L. Program. Both the oral English classes and the L.L. classes made use of the same text material, based on the ELT video *Your Life in Your Hands* (Longman), though, naturally, their classroom procedures differed. While the oral English classes centered on production of English, the L.L. classes, which incidentally were taught by Japanese instructors, centered on listening input and language structure.

Student feedback indicated a strong desire for more chances for oral English production as well as increased native-English speaking teacher contact. This can be considered a reasonable request, for if, as pointed out in an earlier paper (Duggan 1990), the purpose of a “conversation” class is to improve the students’ “conversational” (read oral communicational) abilities in the target language, this goal cannot be reached by study in only the related language skills, whether it be reading, writing, or even listening (L.L.). As Swain (1985) points out, just as Smith (1978, 1982) has argued that one learns to read by reading, and to write by writing, similarly, it can be argued that one learns to speak by speaking. No tennis professional ever reached his/her status by only watching professional tennis tournaments on television, or only listening to the coach lecture. He/she became proficient by long hours of actual practice. The same goes for golf, jewelrymaking, or any other acquired practical skill. To become proficient in a communicative skill such as spoken English, oral communication itself

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must take place.

So with all due respect, how can one expect students to gain oral communication skills with a mere 45 minutes a week with some 50-plus students in a class for only 20~24 weeks of the year? That would come to a total of, at the very most, 18 hours of classtime per year. What skill could anyone reasonably expect to acquire in the span of 18 hours? Certainly not English fluency. In reality, this figure would be much less, as any individual student would not spend the entire time speaking. The teacher speaks, other students (50+) speak. If the instructor spoke one-third of the time, and allowed each student to have a chance to speak in turn, this would result in a surprising figure of slightly less than 15 minutes of speaking time per student over the period of one year.

So, the problem of increasing the students' chances to speak can be seen as a very real one. With regards to this, the planning committee (Karikyuramu Kento Iinkai), which had been previously formed for the purpose of evaluating the English Department's curriculum in preparation for the new University curriculum to be implemented in the near future, brought forth the idea to spin off the oral English class from the L.L. program, into its own common program, much like that of the Ei-I-So (Sogo Eigo) first-year reading program. And logically, to incorporate it into the Kyoyo program that already existed to oversee the Sogo Eigo reading program. In this way, class time for oral English could be doubled, from the existing 45-minute class to 90 minutes. Due to logistical problems, reducing the number of students in a class was not possible at this time.

It was proposed that the conversation class replace an already existing course, freshman writing (Sakubun), as this would make for the smoothest transition as concerns administrative approval, syllabus/schedule arrangement, classroom availability, and paperwork. Due to the administrative paperwork involved at this late date the title of the course would technically remain "Sakubun," though formally it would be called "comprehensive," (thus giving its name to the overall program, "Comprehensive English Program") as the course would involve the study of more than just

the English skill of speaking, as will be presented later in this paper. Informally, though, among teachers, the course was known as “English Conversation.”

Within the overseeing Kyoyo Committee, a program proposal was worked out. This program proposal was presented to Kakai [a general meeting of all full-time instructors in the Department of English] for acceptance essentially as follows:

English I (Comprehensive-Sakubun) Program Proposal

General Educational Objectives (four-year):

That students not only learn subject and content matter in their four years at this institution, but also the skills to apply this content matter and the skills and motivation to be able to continue learning on their own after graduation in order to better their own personal and social growth.

General Yearly Objectives (as specifically concerns applied English subjects):

[the laying out of a year-to-year educational framework is necessarily a prerequisite to the consideration of a specific course or program, for it must be able to fit within this framework.]

1st Year: A relatively controlled situation in which basic and elementary language skills and study skills are presented, practiced and reinforced.

Reading: reading skills and practice, introduction and reinforcement of vocabulary

(Writing: writing skills and practice)

L.L.: listening skills, hearing practice, reinforcement of elementary grammar

Comprehensive:

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- 1) conversational and communicative skills and practice
- 2) listening skills
- 3) exposure to culture and related facets of the language
- 4) writing as an adjunct to the preceding three objectives [As this course completely replaced the writing course, and as this course was still technically titled “Sakubun,” it was thought better to include a writing component.]

2nd Year: Practice and reinforcement of 1st year skills, introduction of intermediate-level material and skills, especially controlled discussion.

3rd & 4th Years: Advanced-level material and specialized elective skills and subjects.

Comprehensive Class Make-up:

predominantly 1st year students

class size approximately 50~60 students

students of varying levels of English proficiency

[students of superior English communicative ability would take an optional interview and be placed in a “special conversation” class, exempting them from taking L.L. but not from Comprehensive/Sakubun]

class length 90 minutes

instructor is a native speaker of English

instructors may be full or part-time

Discussion:

In various research studies cited by LoCastro (1988) concerning English class size in Japan, both teacher and students respondents clearly preferred class sizes of less than 40 students, with an ideal size of 19~20. In one study the figure of 39 was given as the point at which problems related to class size are said to occur and 51 as the point at which classes become intolerably large.

With regard to this, the class size of 1st-year comprehensive classes at Dokkyo University would seem to be too large. The obvious answer is to reduce the number of students in a class, as is done with 2nd-year conversation classes. As this is unfeasible at this point, another solution must be found. Current pedagogy (both theoretical and applied) suggests having the students work in pairs and groups, as well as providing these pairs and groups with a variety of task-based activities (Luckett, 1988; Nolasco & Arthur, 1986; Helgesen, 1982). Multi-level classes also pose a problem, especially when the levels of varying proficiency are especially pronounced due to the inclusion of “returnee” students. As the norm for large classes are generally multi-level, the techniques used are quite similar (Helgesen, 1982). Advanced students can be placed together in pairs and groups in some exercises, or as “leaders” in pairs/groups with students of lower proficiency.

The varying styles and classroom techniques of the instructors involved must also be taken into account. In keeping with the goal of a certain degree of standardization among the first-year classes, a basic structural system should be set forth. This centers around the use of a set text, course objectives, a general classroom procedural system, standardized testing and grading system. To allow the instructors flexibility, as each has his/her own teaching style that works best and should be made use of, a general set of proposed guidelines and exercises will be distributed, to be used as the instructor sees fit.

Proposed Program:

A three-point system that consists of three parts: *text*, *activity* and *topic*.

- I) Text: refers to primary teaching material(s), be it a textbook, video, handouts, or some other source. A video text such as *A Weekend Away* and *A Week by the Sea* (both by Oxford University Press) is preferable for its advantages over a textbook:

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- 1) keeps the attention of a large number of students better
- 2) allows a visual source of cultural material
- 3) increases comprehensible input
- 4) gives the possibility of better comprehensive testing

Unfortunately, the use of a video text hinges on the availability of video-equipped classrooms of the appropriate size. With respect to this, an alternate text is proposed. Recent popular course textbooks such as *English Firsthand* (Lingual House), *East-West* (Oxford University Press), and *Coast-to-Coast* (Longman) among others are quite well-organized and in full-color, and incorporate the bases of pair-work and variety of task-based exercises as laid out in the proposed three-point system.

II) Activity: refers to an complementary exercise or activity relating to a/the linguistic or topical point being covered in the text. Instructors are encouraged to use complementary/supplementary material of their own.

III) Topic: a weekly pre-lesson (homework) writing exercise related to a/the linguistic or topical point being covered in the lesson. Emphasizes the building of communication skills (speaking & listening), as well as cultural and affective targets (getting to know your classmates better and taking into account others' opinions), more than writing skills, though these too can be worked on depending on the technique used (please refer to pages __~__ for sample topics and techniques). Students work in pairs and groups.

Testing & Grading System:

One of the most difficult problems facing a class such as this concerns the testing and grading system. As the goal of this class centers around conversational and communicative skills and practice, a grade based on a student's linguistic ability through a written test would

be unfeasible, as this would be but a diagnostic test not directly related to what was done in class. In any case, an initially more proficient student would unfairly receive a better grade. Orally testing 50~60 students would also be unfeasible, not only due to the time factor, but also to ridiculousness of a 5-minute oral test carrying any substantial grade weighting relative to 26 hours of oral production in class. The following guidelines are recommended in determining the grade:

- 1) attendance: if you are not in class, you cannot participate in communicative skills and practice.
- 2) participation: this score is to be assigned by the instructor based on the student's performance in class. A seating chart is recommended to keep track of the students. Quizzes are optional and at the discretion of the instructor. May be used to test preparation for that days lesson, or comprehension of the covered lesson.
- 3) a midterm & final: as much as possible, based on comprehension of the material covered in class. Is to be considered only one part of the grade.
- 4) topics: collected and simply marked either pass or fail by the instructor (to reduce the work load on said instructor) to check whether student prepared or not for that day's exercise using the topic.

In Closing:

This program is intended for one year's use, at which time it will be evaluated and reconsidered in concordance with the entire 1st-year English program.

The preceding program was acceptable and passed by Kakai, and so was put into effect. VCR/monitor/projector sets were purchased by the school and installed on various teaching floors for use by this program, thus clearing the way for the use of a video text.

Search, and discussion in meetings, for the most appropriate video text

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resulted in the choice of Mystery Tour (Oxford University Press), a made-for-EFL video. Some of the reasons this particular video was chosen were:

- 1) The level of English used as well as the activities presented were appropriate for our students.
- 2) The storyline was interesting and “followable.”
- 3) The video was well-produced and professional.
- 4) The video consisted of ten episodes, that at two classes per episode, would fit well into the planned syllabus.
- 5) Each episode stressed specific linguistic points which could be expanded and worked on using the “topics.”
- 6) A wide variety of activities and exercises were presented with each episode, giving each instructor the choice of what he or she wanted to work on.
- 7) The layout of the students’ textbooks were colorful and organized.
- 8) The Video Guide (teacher’s guide) gave useful teaching hints to the teachers, and also included a complete teaching plan at the pace of 2 classes per episode, useful for those teachers who did not have their own personal teaching plan.

The preceding program proposal was also circulated around a number of the native-English speaking teachers (both full-time and part-time) who might be teaching in the program to also get their impressions and feedback. Their feedback and comments were taken into account in the continued planning of the program and the resultant Guidelines for Instructors, the comprehensive final draft for the Comprehensive-Sakubun teaching program. The Guidelines for Instructors actually consisted of five documents:

- 1) Guidelines for Instructors (Basic Program)
- 2) Possible Topics
- 3) Possible Topic Techniques
- 4) Sample 90-minute Class

5) Using the Video Projector and Equipment

After the finalization of teachers' schedules, the instructors who would be teaching the course for the 1991~92 school year were presented with the following Guidelines for Instructors set (A meeting would be held in early April before the start of classes to answer any questions they might have about the program and teaching, as well as to introduce them to the materials (use of texts and videos and set up and operation of audiovisual equipment.)

Guidelines for Instructors (1991~92 School Year)

The English I (Composition) Program is a coordinated program of ten first-year classes under the auspices of the Comprehensive English Committee (Kyoyo Eigo Iinkai). While the individual instructors' classes are not strictly regulated, with the exceptions of the text selection and major tests, it is hoped that the individual instructors will attempt to follow the program objectives and guidelines presented.

Please note that though the title of this course is "composition," the objectives of this course are fourfold:

- 1) to give students practice in building conversational and communicative skills
- 2) to improve students' listening skills
- 3) to expose students to the "culture" of the language
- 4) the use of writing as an adjunct to the preceding three objectives

The make-up of your classes will be as follows:

- 1) 1st year students
- 2) class size approximately 50~60 students
- 3) varying levels of English proficiency among the students (including "returnees")

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4) class length: 90 minutes

Instruction Program:

A three-part system that consists of *text*, *activity* and *topic* will be used.

- I) Text: The video *Mystery Tour* (Oxford University Press) will be used as the core of the program. Instructors will each be given a copy of the Activity Book and of the Video Guide (a kind of teacher's guide which explains how to use the video). Students will only have the Activity Book. The Video Guide is self-explanatory. Please preview the video and read pages 1~9 in your Video Guide before your classes begin.

Mystery Tour consists of ten episodes. As you will have of total of 22~24 actual teaching classes during the school year (10~12 in the first term and 11~12 in the second term) depending on the day of the week of your class(es), it is suggested that you spend 2 classes per episode. Your Video Guide provides you with a convenient Double Lesson Plan for each episode.

- II) The Activity refers those complementary exercises or activities relating to a/the linguistic or topical point being covered in the text. The Activity Book presents a number of such exercises. Optional, and time permitting, the instructor may use these, or complementary/supplementary material of their own, and are encouraged to do so.
- III) The Topic is a weekly pre-lesson (homework) writing exercise related to a/the linguistic or topical point being covered in the lesson. Emphasizes the building of communication skills (speaking & listening), as well as cultural and affective targets (getting to know your classmates better and taking into account others' opinions), more than writing skills, though these too can be worked on depending on the technique used (see page __ for sample techniques).

The instructor assigns a topic (see page __ for sample topics) to students the class before. Students write up their opinions or such concerning the topic assigned *before* the class (as *homework*). You will find that some students will attempt to write it in the class it is due. As this will cause them not to pay attention to the lesson at hand, and to be poorly prepared when you wish to do the topic exercise, I suggest collecting the topic at the beginning of class and recording a grade (prepared or not prepared) and not allowing a grade for any late topics. Late topics such as a week late should also not be accepted, as the purpose of a topic is to give the students communication practice in that previous class. It is suggested that the instructor set a minimum written word limit such as “100 words” instead of a limit such as “one page” which will cause some students to write in large letters or to skip lines so as to write as little as possible. This defeats the purpose of the exercise. While this exercise does not stress spelling or grammar, it is up to each individual instructor as to how he/she wishes to handle this.

Using the topic, the students usually work in pairs or groups (to maximize communication time and to leave the teacher free to walk around and monitor) using various techniques (see page __), though the instructor is encouraged to use topics or techniques of his/her own make or choosing. At the completion of the exercise or class, the teacher collects the topics from the students. To minimize work on the teacher, it is suggested that students be given either a pass (meaning they were prepared) or fail (if they failed to turn in a topic, or it was under the minimum written word limit).

Scoring & Grading System:

At the end of the school year (around January~February), each instructor is responsible for submitting a grade for each student to the Kyomuka (Academic Affairs Office). The midyear and final tests will be carried out by the Comprehensive English Committee and the

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resulting scores will be passed on to the class instructors for use in determining final student grades.

The following guidelines are recommended in determining grades:

- 1) attendance (20%): if you are not in class, you cannot participate in communicative skills and practice.
- 2) participation (20%): this score is to be assigned by the instructor based on the student's performance in class. A seating chart is recommended to keep track of the students. Quizzes are optional and at the discretion of the instructor. May be used to test preparation for that day's lesson, or comprehension of the covered lesson.
- 3) a midterm & final (40%): based on comprehension of the material covered in class. Is to be considered only one part of the grade.
- 4) topics: (20%): collected and simply marked either pass or fail by the instructor (to reduce the work load on said instructor) to check whether student prepared or not for that day's exercise using the topic. If 20 topics are assigned as expected, then each topic would equal 1% of the total score.

Possible Topics

(Based on the linguistic points stressed in each chapter. Please refer to the contents page of the activity book.)

Episode 1:

Describe your family (physical, character, job, etc.) <description; pres. tense>

Bring a picture of your family (or friends) and describe the people and the situation in the picture <description; pres. tense>

Describe yourself, including personality and interests <description; pres. tense>

Describe your plans for the future <going to future>

Tell about your plans for the weekend/Golden Week/summer break
<going to future>

Tell about your best friend <description; pres. tense>

Episode 2:

Tell about a problem you have, or something that disturbs you (like
people smoking next to you in a restaurant, or people who take up
two seats in the train) <suggestions, past tense>

Tell about five things you did today <past tense>

Tell about a dream you had <past tense>

Tell about your most frightening experience <past tense>

Tell about a high school experience <past tense>

Episode 3:

Tell about something you did that you were sorry for <ought to/should;
pres. perf.>

What is the best cure for a hangover? <ought to/should; pres. perf.>

Tell how to find a good job <speculation>

Tell about an embarrassing incident <ought to/should; pres. perf.>

Tell about the secret for a long life <speculation>

Episode 4:

Tell about an experience with the police <police; should/ought to>

Tell about your schedule yesterday <time words; reporting>

Tell about what you did each day last week <time words; reporting>

Tell about the happiest day of your life <reporting>

Describe Japan in 50 years <future; because,so>

Episode 5:

Tell about a bad habit you have or had <past perf.; used to>

Tell about things you don't like to do <giving advice>

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I believe at this point you should be able to think up appropriate topics of your own. But if you're stumped, here are a few more that may help you:

A person I admire; My favorite place in Japan; What is the best country in the world; If I could be invisible for one day; If I found one million dollars; The biggest problem in the world; The best age for marriage; My earliest memory; One day on the train; The difference between Japanese and Westerners; How to find a rich spouse; Where would you take a guest in Tokyo; An ideal holiday; Three things I hope to do before I die; My first date; Should Japan have nuclear power; Good points and bad points of the Japanese educational system.

Possible Topic Techniques

With 2 students (Pairwork):

- 1) Student A tells topic to Student B. Then B tells topic to A.
- 2) A tells topic to B. B tells A's topic back to A, while A helps if needed. Reverse roles.
- 3) A tells topic to B line by line. B repeats line by line. Reverse roles.
- 4) A tells topic to B. B makes and asks assigned number of Yes/No and/or Wh-questions to A. A answers questions.
- 5) A tells topic to B. Then, A makes and asks questions to B concerning topic to check B's comprehension. Reverse roles.
- 6) A tells topic within a given time limit, say 3 min., while B times. Then, time limit is reduced to 2, then 1 min. forcing A to gradually summarize. Reverse roles.
- 7) A tells topic to B. Then, B summarizes A's topic back to A. Reverse roles.
- 8) A tells topic to B. Then, B summarizes A's topic within a certain time limit while A times. This time limit is gradually reduced. Reverse roles.
- 9) A tells topic. Then A makes false statements concerning own topic which B corrects.

- 10) Before relating topics, A and B ask each other questions in order to find out details of the topics before starting. Topics are then told.
- 11) A tells first sentence of topic. B tries to guess the content of the next sentence. A tells real sentence. Continue. Reverse roles.
- 12) A tells topic to B. B retells topic to A, but changes the tense. Reverse roles.

With 3 students:

- 13) A tells topic to B, who repeats and passes on to C, who tells back to A. A corrects any mistakes. Change roles.
- 14) A tells topic. B summarizes A's topic in a short amount of time. C summarizes in an even shorter amount of time. Change roles.
- 15) A tells topic. B makes and asks an assigned number of Yes/No and/or Wh-questions concerning A's topic to C. C answers questions, while A checks.

With 4 students:

- 16) A and B tell each other topics. C and D do the same. Then A tells B's topic to C. The others do the same with the topics they listened to.
- 17) All four students tell their topics one-by-one. Then, each student must tell one sentence about each of the others' topics.

Please adapt these techniques or make up your own as you see fit in your classes.

Sample 90-minute Class **(for first half of Episode 3 of Mystery Tour)**

Minutes 00~05: Have students set up video equipment. Take roll.

Minutes 06~12: In pairs, have students go over and ask and answer each other the questions in the first Before You Watch (p.22). Ask the questions to the class as a whole to check correct answers.

Minutes 13~20: Watch Episode 3.

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Minutes 21~27: Have students complete the true/false chart in the first After You Watch. Let them compare their answers in pairs.

Minutes 28~32: Have students work in pairs to order the pictures in the Section 1 Before You Watch.

Minutes 33~35: Watch Section One.

Minutes 36~42: Have students complete the Section One After You Watch.

Minutes 43~57: Follow same procedure as above for Section Two.

Minutes 58~73: Expand on a part of the video using the Multi-Level Plan, work on an exercise or two from pages 26~27 or try an activity you have in mind.

Minutes 74~86: Have students take out their topics (they were assigned a topic such as “What is the secret for a long life?”) and working together in pairs they follow a technique such Number 7 (see handout page __).

Minutes 87~90: Students are assigned the topic for the following class, and this week’s topics are collected.

The preceding was but one simple example of how an instructor might carry out his/her class. You might want to spend more time on the topic, and less on (or skip) the activity. Or the time you allocate for the different parts might change from week to week. This is fine. You have flexibility to set up the class in the way that you think best serves the needs of the students within the general guidelines of the program.

Using the Video Projector and Equipment

I assume everyone can use a VCR. By this I mean being able to turn it on and get a picture, as well as using the major functions such as fast forward and pause. If you have any difficulties, might want to refer to page 8 of the Video Guide. If you are not as familiar with using the VCR

as an educational tool, I strongly urge you to read over pages 6 and 7 of the Video Guide. It gives good, basic ideas on how to use video in the classroom.

In order to set up the video equipment, you'll have to follow the following steps:

- 1) You'll notice your classroom has no video equipment. You'll be using moveable equipment that will have to be brought to and set up in the classroom. This equipment was purchased only recently especially for this program.
- 2) In the open area in the middle of the floor on which your room is located, you'll notice three large blue lockers. The video equipment needed are behind these locked doors.
- 3) You'll need to pick up the keys to one of these lockers in the teachers' commons room on the first floor of the center building. Just ask one of the ladies at the counter.
- 4) All the equipment will be on a trolley. Have the students help you move the equipment into the room, about one-third of the way down the center aisle.
- 5) On the trolley there will be a video projector, VCR, and two speakers. Set up the speakers up where you find the best balance of convenience and sound quality. Be extra careful of the wires. They're easy to trip over in the dark!
- 6) Pull down the screen at the front of the room with a wire hook, probably lying in a front corner of the room.
- 7) Plug in the power cord of the equipment in one of the outlet at the front of the room.
- 8) Switch on the main switch on the back of the projector.
- 9) Push on the power switch on the top left side of the projector.
- 10) Push on the power switch on the front left side of the VCR.
- 11) Push on the power switch located on the lower front of only one of the speakers. (The adjacent knob is the volume.)

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- 12) Close the curtains.
- 13) Insert video into the VCR.
- 14) Push play on the VCR (or you can use the remote control) and the show is on!

Please be careful not to turn up the volume too loud as this will disturb other classes in your vicinity.

To put away the video equipment, just follow the above steps in reverse.

If you have any problems, contact the first section of the Kyomuka (Academic Affairs) Department.

The Video Examination

One of the most difficult problems facing oral communication teachers is how assess students, as stated in the Program Proposal. And, as pointed out in the Guidelines for Instructors (1991~92), the midyear and final tests, making up 40% of the students' grade, would be carried out by the Comprehensive English Committee.

The proposal was presented to committee that, as the course emphasizes listening skills as well as conversational skills, and since it does use video as the medium of instruction, a "video" test would most appropriately meet the requirements of collectively assessing the students. The difficulty in using such a test involved the actual logistics concerned: not just what kind of questions, but who would make them; the production, editing, and dubbing of the test tape; the acquisition and setting up of the facilities (rooms, video equipment) and support personnel (technical and administrative) needed to carry out the testing of 500 students; and the use of facilities and support to score the tests.

These tasks were addressed in committee with the following results.

The blueprint for the testing would be the Sogo Eigo program, as this program has in the past and would be testing the 500 freshmen students. Except for some items specific to the use of video testing (production of test videos and video equipment setup for testing), most of the logistics could be similarly addressed (rooms and administrative support as well as the facilities and support to computer score the tests).

As to the actual making of the test, if the same computer scoring program used by Sogo Eigo was to be used, the test would have to be made up of fifty multiple choice (A~D) questions. Some of the possible types of questions discussed were as follows (Muted part or answer in brackets):

- 1) Short scene w/single word or expression muted. Sort of a “listening cloze.” (If possible to mute selectively.)
 - *“... There’s [rubbish] everywhere.”
 - *“How about the [wardrobe] if they’ve been looking for the blazer.”
- 2) Short scene w/sound to which students give/select an appropriate response. Preferably with response scene shown, but muted.
 - *“How would you like to pay? Cash, check or credit card?”
 - “[American Express.]”
 - *“You’re the second person who’s been asking today.”
 - “Who’s the first?”
 - “[A woman. She was driving a big American Jeep.]”
- 3) Short scene w/sound to which students give/select an appropriate statement or question would give rise to the oral response shown. Preferably with the preceding part shown, but muted.
 - *“[He works here doesn’t he?]”
 - “Yes, he’s the cleaner.”
 - *“[I’ve been thinking.]”
 - “Congratulations.”

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- 4) Short scene w/o sound to which students gives/selects an appropriate utterance.
 - *“[C'mon David, let's get out of here.]”
 - *“[We're looking for Tommy.]”
- 5) Short scene w/o sound to which students describe the situation.
 - *[They're looking for Tommy.]
 - *[He's paying for the gas.]
 - *[They're leaving Tommy's apartment, and have run into the police.]
- 6) Short scene w/sound to which students give/select what will happen next.
 - *[They open the wardrobe, and are surprised when the ironing board falls out.]
- 7) Longer scene to which students answer a number of comprehension questions based on the scene.
 - * Such as the scene: David talks to Tommy.

It was decided to use question types numbers, 2, 5, & 7. These types would be referred to forthwith as “response-type” (2), “description-type” (5), and “comprehension-type” (7). The fifty-answer test would ultimately consist of 10 response-type questions, 10 description-type questions, and 10 sets of 3 comprehension-type questions. The work of making the test questions was divided among the members of the committee and upon completion were checked and assembled into a fifty-question test in committee.

It was decided that to test the students listening comprehension ability, the entire test would take place on the video, both test questions and multiple-choice answers. During the actual testing, students would only

have a computer scoring sheet before them. After all, this was not a test of reading comprehension. The testing format was as follows.

After all the students were seated and ready, following adjustment for lighting and volume, the video tape would begin. With the scene frozen on the title, directions for taking the test were dubbed onto the video soundtrack in Japanese. A pause was given to allow any students a last chance to ask any questions. The video test proceeded into the first of three parts —— Response:

(Short scene w/sound:) “Fifteen pounds. How would you like to pay?

Cash, credit card or cheque?”

(Scene freezes on last frame. A dubbed voice says:)

“Question number ____.”

“a. No, thank you.”

“b. I’m American.”

“c. American Express.”

“d. By express mail.”

(10-second pause while students record their answer on the computer scoring sheet provided.)

Questions 11 to 20 consisted of Description-type questions:

(Medium length scene without sound)

(Scene freezes on last frame. A dubbed voice says:)

“Question number ____.”

“a. They’re looking for Tommy.”

“b. They’re going out to dinner.”

“c. They’re looking for the police.”

“d. They’re leaving Tommy’s apartment.”

(10-second pause while students record their answer on the computer scoring sheet provided.)

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The third and final section — Comprehension — consisted of 10 long scenes with sound, each scene followed by three comprehension-type questions:

(Long scene with sound)

(Scene freezes on last frame. A dubbed voice says:)

“Question number __.”

“Where did Tommy get the blazer?”

“a. Curtis gave it to him.”

“b. Curtis had an accident and Tommy picked it up.”

“c. Tommy found it in the garbage.”

“d. We don’t know.”

“Question number __.”

“When did Curtis disappear from the museum?”

“a. before 11:30.”

“b. after midday.”

“c. between 11:30 and midday.”

“d. We don’t know.”

“Question number __.”

“Who did Tommy sell the blazer to?”

“a. Curtis.”

“b. a first-hand clothes shop.”

“c. Dom Dom.”

“d. none of the above.”

The test took approximately 45 minutes to complete. The computer scoring answer sheets were then collected and computer scored, and the score results of each class was presented to the respective instructors for inclusion into students’ overall assessment.

The 1993~94 Program

At the end of the first year, the program was evaluated and reconsider-

ed in committee and with feedback from the instructors. As the feedback was positive, it was decided to make no major changes for the coming year (1992~93).

The next major changes in the Comprehensive Program actually occurred the the following year (1993~94). These were two. The first concerned a change in the choice of text material.

The Jericho Conspiracy (Oxford University Press) was selected to replace *Mystery Tour*, the video used in this program the preceding two years, for the following reasons:

- a) Feedback from the instructors has indicated a general overfamiliarity (read boredom from teaching the same thing two years in a row) with *Mystery Tour*. *The Jericho Conspiracy* is a newly released English video that should make class a little more interesting for the teacher.
- b) *The Jericho Conspiracy* is a mystery in a similar vein to *Mystery Tour*. Mysteries do have some advantage towards keeping student interest both during the class period and from week to week.
- c) *The Jericho Conspiracy* is a well-made and interesting video. It is felt that Oxford has refined their techniques in the production of both video and activity book with regards to *Mystery Tour*. The sound quality of *The Jericho Conspiracy* was found to be superior to that of *Mystery Tour*.
- d) The layout of *The Jericho Conspiracy* activity book (and video guide) is much less complex and confusing than that of *Mystery Tour*. The exercises and activities presented were found to be more relevant, more enjoyable, less "picky," of greater flexibility, and more conducive towards motivating students to work together in pairs or small groups with less teacher supervision, an important point for large classes like ours. Even Oxford considers this video activity book to be their best yet!

Though *The Jericho Conspiracy* consisted of eight episodes, instead of the 10 of *Mystery Tour*, this is still appropriate to the course syllabus at a

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pace of 2 to 3 classes per episode. The text support for the program (activities, teacher's guide) that was found in *Mystery Tour* can also be found in *The Jericho Conspiracy*.

The other major change in the program occurred in the style of assessment, and instructors were given the following instructions in the Guidelines for the 1993~94 school year:

In the past two years, the midyear and final tests were carried out by the Comprehensive English Sub-Committee and the resulting scores was passed on to the class instructors for use in determining final student grades. From this year, instructors will be responsible for giving and scoring their own midyear and final tests, if they wish to give such.

As this program emphasizes student attention and participation, student grades should be determined on a continuous assessment basis. The following guidelines are recommended in determining grades:

- 1) attendance: If a student is absent or very late more than seven times, he or she should fail the course. You may wish to treat very late students as being absent, and/or two lates as one absence. How late students are handled is up to the discretion of each instructor. A limit of five absences should be more than enough to cover any sicknesses or emergencies. Students should be warned not to take advantage of this limit, as attendance will count as part of their grade.
- 2) attendance & participation (40%): This score should be based on the student's performance in class, preparation, assignments, etc., as well as on attendance. If the student is not in class, he or she is not able to participate, and should receive a zero for that day.
- 3) Tests & quizzes (40%): If, and how, tests are carried out is up to the discretion of each instructor. Quizzes may be used to test preparation for that day's lesson, or comprehension of a covered lesson.
- 4) topics: (20%): collected and simply marked either pass or fail by the

instructor (to reduce the work load on said instructor) to check whether student prepared or not for that day's exercise using the topic. If 20 topics are assigned as expected, then each topic would equal 1% of the total score.

The reasons for shifting part of the assessment system from a common test given by the committee (as laid out in the previous section concerning the video exam) to each individual instructor were as follows:

- 1) Students were putting too much emphasis on the exams rather than their classwork, where it should be. Giving each instructor complete control of assessment for his/her own class would make students put more emphasis on what was occurring in class rather than what might appear on the common test.
- 2) No matter how good a test is made for a class-year of 500 students, a teacher for an individual class should be able to give a more appropriate test.
- 3) Teachers would seem to be teaching for the common exams rather than teaching the class the material in the most efficient way for that class and that teacher.
- 4) The video exams themselves had a problem that was noticed in the second year. As students heard the answer they believed was the correct one, they would immediately record it on the computer scoring sheet. Anyone sitting towards the rear of the room during the test might notice that if a majority of students bent over at the same time to record an answer, that it could be assumed that this was probably the correct answer. This phenomenon was observed in the final test of the second year, as were a few students who also seemed to have caught on. Indeed, when this observer answered the remaining questions based solely on this phenomenon, he scored well above random chance. In light of this, continued common testing, at least in this form, could not be continued.

The 1994~95 Program

The 1994~95 school year brought the largest changes to this program since its inception. The most important of these was the reduction in class size to about 20~25, half its previous size. As originally argued in the Program Proposal, a smaller class size for a program like this (or most any oral communication course) is desirable if not required. The change in size came as a result of a major change in the overall first-year program, which in turn, was a part of the departmental change involved in the new curriculum. But, for this paper, we shall confine ourselves to those changes that directly involved the Basic Conversation Program.

The Comprehensive-Sakubun course program received a new title, the same one it holds today — English III (Freshman English) Basic Conversation Program. But Basic Conversation is but one of the three parts that make up English III. Kaiwa-L.L. (the aforementioned L.L. Program) and Advanced Conversation (the aforementioned spinoff from the L.L. Program, for returnees) are the other two. While the number of classes in the Basic Conversation Program remained at ten, the number of students per class was reduced by half by the following way. Upon matriculation to the Department of English, freshmen students would take a listening placement test to best place them in the class most appropriate to their level of English ability — Kaiwa-L.L., Basic Conversation, or Advanced Conversation. Approximately 25% would be placed in Kaiwa-L.L., 25% in Advanced Conversation, and the remaining 50% in Basic Conversation. In this way the number of students per class was effectively halved.

The reduction in numbers led to the decision to change another part of the program, the text material. From the 1994~95 school year, instructors in the program were given more freedom to use the text material that they wished to. This decision was based on the assumption that with smaller classes, and being experienced professionals, especially in the field of teaching conversation/communication, the instructors could better teach

the classes with the methods and materials they knew best how to use. This does not mean that instructors were given free rein to do whatever they wanted to do. The same programs goals and guidelines were applied. Instructors were free to do as they needed to satisfy these goals and guidelines. They were also given the choice to follow either the *Mystery Tour* or *The Jericho Conspiracy* syllabi laid out in previous years, if they did not have their own syllabus/teaching plan. Those teachers who wished to follow their own plan were asked to fill out a form describing said plan and to submit it to the committee for approval. Out of the ten teachers teaching in the program for the 1994~95 school year, three chose to follow the *Mystery Tour* syllabus, five *The Jericho Conspiracy* syllabus, and three their own teaching syllabus.

The Guidelines for the 1994-95 school year that were given to instructors follows:

Guidelines for Instructors (1994~95)

The Freshman English Basic Conversation Program is a coordinated program of 10 first-year classes under the auspices of the Comprehensive English Sub-Committee (Kyoyo Eigo Uneiinkai:Toitsu Puroguramu Han). While the individual instructors' classes are not strictly regulated, it is hoped that the individual instructors will attempt to follow the program objectives and guidelines presented.

Those instructors who have taught this course in the past three years (*Mystery Tour*, *The Jericho Conspiracy*) should already be familiar with the basic program.

The major changes from the past years are in style of text/syllabus determination and in greater detail of course goals. These are explained in detail later in these guidelines.

Overall Goals of the Program:

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To bring students up to a level of communicative competence in accordance with the overall goals of the four-year English language program. Specifically for this one-year course, this would entail achieving a level of competence sufficient enough to competently pursue and take part in the more advanced English conversation courses offered in the following years.

Class make-up:

Class size: Approximately 25 students

Class length: 90 minutes

Instructors: Native English-speaking instructors (full and part-time)

English III Program Structure:

The English III (Freshman English) program consists of three complementary courses: Kaiwa/L.L., Basic Conversation, and Advanced Conversation. First-year English Dept. students are required to pass one of these three courses to satisfy graduation requirements.

These three courses are complementary in that, based on the results of a placement test, freshmen students will be placed in the most appropriate course for their competence level. Students who score low on the placement test would be assumed to be lacking in practical listening skills, an important step that must be remedied before oral production is stressed. As such, they will be placed in the Kaiwa/L.L. course. Kaiwa/L.L., as the “lower” course, would during the year as a whole concentrate more on developing practical listening skills. The majority of students, those who score in the “average” range will be placed in the Basic Conversation course, the course you will be teaching. Students who score high on the placement test would find themselves in the Advanced Conversation course. The great majority of students in this course would most likely be made up of “returnees,” and as such being already competent in listening skills, would immediately

spend more time on advanced oral production using video and reading materials through discussion, debate, etc.

Basic Conversation Course Syllabus:

As the native English-speaking staff teaching here are considered to be professional and have expertise in teaching, particularly in the area of English conversation, it has been decided to give the instructors in this program the leeway to teach as they see best, but with regard to the course goals and guidelines previously laid out in these Guidelines.

The Committee has approved two course syllabi for use with this program. Instructors may use one of these, or “do their own thing” (make your own syllabus, again with respect to the course goals and guidelines). If you opt to use a teaching plan of your own making, please send in a copy of your syllabus and assessment methods by February 21st using the enclosed syllabus questionnaire and envelope. If you decide to use either *Mystery Tour* or *The Jericho Conspiracy*, we will take care of ordering the texts, but please send in the enclosed syllabus questionnaire by February 21st with your choice circled, so we can order the texts in time for classes. If you decide to use a teaching plan of your own, it will be up to you to order the texts, or otherwise seeing to the teaching material.

You may be familiar with the two approved teaching syllabi. They are the *Mystery Tour* and *Jericho Conspiracy* courses of the past three years. For those of you not familiar with these closely similar courses, a teaching syllabus for each has been included with these Guidelines. Regardless of whether you choose to use the *Mystery Tour* syllabus, *The Jericho Conspiracy* syllabus, or a syllabus of your own making, please inform your students at the start of the course what is expected of them and how their grades will be assessed, to head off any future problems. Impress upon them that the greater part of their grade will be on how

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they perform in class, rather than on any midyear or final tests, as they will tend to overemphasize any tests you give and underemphasize the importance of the actual classes.

The Mystery Tour Syllabus

Course Objectives:

- 1) to give students practice in building conversational and communicative skills
- 2) to improve students' listening skills
- 3) to expose students to the "culture" of the language
- 4) the use of writing as an adjunct to the preceding three objectives

Instruction Program:

A three-part system that consists of *text*, *activity* and *topic* will be used.

- I) Text: The video *Mystery Tour* (Oxford University Press) will be used as the core of the program. *Mystery Tour*, is, as the name implies, a "who-done-it" type of mystery, centering around the adventures of a private investigator and his tour guide girlfriend who try to solve the mystery of a missing tourist. The sound quality of this video can be very bad at times, and the acting/script kind of amateurish and corny, but this is what makes it unintentionally funny. The level is "intermediate." Instructors will each be given a copy of the video, the Activity Book (a text for students which includes the script, and various classroom pairwork, writing and discussion activities based on the video) and the Video Guide (a kind of teacher's guide to the video and Activity Book, including answers, useful teaching hints and optional activities for the video and Activity Book). Students will only have the Activity Book. Please preview the video and read pages 1~9 in your Video Guide before your classes begin.

Mystery Tour consists of ten episodes. As you will have a total of 22 ~24 actual teaching classes during the school year (10~12 in the first term and 10~12 in the second term) depending on the day of the week of your class(es), it is suggested that you spend 2 classes per episode. Your Video Guide provides you with a convenient Double Lesson Plan for each episode.

- II) The Activity refers those complementary exercises or activities relating to a linguistic or topical point being covered in a certain episode of the text. The Activity Book presents a number of such exercises. Instructors are encouraged to use these, or complementary/supplementary material of their own as time permits.
- III) The Topic is a weekly pre-lesson (homework) writing exercise related to a linguistic or topical point being covered in the lesson. It emphasizes the building of communication skills (speaking & listening), as well as cultural and affective targets (getting to know your classmates better and taking into account the opinions of others), more than writing skills, though these too can be worked on depending on the technique used (see page __ for sample techniques).

The instructor assigns a topic (see page __ for sample topics) to students the class before. Students write up their opinions or such concerning the topic assigned before the class (as homework). You will find that some students will attempt to write it in the class it is due. As this will cause them not to pay attention to the lesson at hand, and to be poorly prepared when you wish to do the topic exercise, I suggest collecting the topic at the beginning of class and recording a grade (simply “prepared” or “not prepared”), and then returning the papers to them for the topic exercise. Late papers — even if only an hour, day, or week late — should not be accepted. The purpose of a topic is to give the students communication

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practice in the class they were due. It is suggested that the instructor set a minimum written word limit such as “100 words” instead of a limit such as “one page” which might cause some students to write in large letters or to skip lines. While this exercise does not stress spelling or grammar, it is up to each individual instructor as to how he/she wishes to handle this.

Using the topic, the students usually work in pairs or groups (to maximize communication time and to leave the teacher free to walk around and monitor — again see page __ for sample techniques). The instructor is encouraged to use topics or techniques of his/her own make or choosing. At the completion of the exercise or class, the teacher collects the topics from the students. To minimize work on the teacher, it is suggested that students be given either a pass (meaning they were prepared) or fail (if they failed to turn in a topic, or it was under the minimum written word limit).

Scoring & Grading System:

At the end of the school year (around January~February), each instructor is responsible for submitting a grade for each student to the Academic Affairs Office (Kyomuka). Instructors will be responsible for giving and scoring their own midyear and final tests, if they wish to give such. A video midyear and final test is available for *Mystery Tour*, but be aware that these tests have been used in the past.

As this program emphasizes student attention and participation, student grades should be determined on a continuous assessment basis. The following guidelines are recommended in determining grades:

- 1) attendance: If a student is absent or very late more than seven times, he or she should fail the course. You may wish to treat very late students as being absent, and/or two lates as one absence. How late students are handled is up to the discretion of

each instructor. A limit of five absences should be more than enough to cover any sicknesses or emergencies. Students should be warned not to take advantage of this limit, as attendance will count as part of their grade.

- 2) attendance & participation (40%): This score should be based on the student's performance in class, preparation, assignments, etc., as well as on attendance. If the student is not in class, he or she is not able to participate, and should receive a zero for that day.
- 3) Tests & quizzes (40%): If, and how, tests are carried out is up to the discretion of each instructor. Quizzes may be used to test preparation for that day's lesson, or comprehension of a covered lesson.
- 4) topics: (20%): collected and simply marked either pass or fail by the instructor (to reduce the work load on said instructor) to check whether student prepared or not for that day's exercise using the topic. If 20 topics are assigned as expected, then each topic would equal 1% of the total score.

The Jericho Conspiracy Syllabus

Course Objectives:

- 1) to give students practice in building conversational and communicative skills
- 2) to improve students' listening skills
- 3) to expose students to the "culture" of the language
- 4) the use of writing as an adjunct to the preceding three objectives

Instruction Program:

A three-part system that consists of text, activity and topic will be used.

- I) Text: The video *The Jericho Conspiracy* (Oxford University

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Press) will be used as the core of the program. The *Jericho Conspiracy* is a “who-done-it” type of mystery, centering around the adventures of a radio reporter/D.J. and with the aid of a few assorted friends, takes on the powers-that-be to uncover a “dastardly” plot. The script and acting are very well done, and the layout of the Activity Book exercises are quite clear. The level is “intermediate.”

Instructors will each be given a copy of the video, the Activity Book (a text for students which includes the script, and various classroom pairwork, writing and discussion activities based on the video) and the Video Guide (a kind of teacher’s guide to the video and Activity Book, including answers, useful teaching hints and optional activities for the video and Activity Book). Students will only have the Activity Book. Please preview the video and read pages 1~3 in your Video Guide before your classes begin.

The Jericho Conspiracy consists of eight episodes. As you will have of total of 22~24 actual teaching classes during the school year (10~12 in the first term and 10~12 in the second term) depending on the day of the week of your class(es), it is suggested that you spend 2~3 classes per episode. Your Video Guide can aid you in your planning.

[The sections dealing with Activity, Topic, and Assessment were similar to those found in the *Mystery Tour* Syllabus, and so are not included here.]

Program Syllabus Questionnaire

Please fill out and return by February 21st using the enclosed

~95) were:

- 1) Possible Topics
- 2) Possible Topic Techniques
- 3) Using the Video Projector & Equipment

In Conclusion

A teaching program or syllabus is not a static item. It must be evaluated and reviewed, changed and sometimes created as the needs and situations change. It is hoped that the reader has come to the same realization, and has gained some insight into one such process.

My thanks to those involved and who helped out in the planning and implementation of this program, including fellow committee members for their work, members of the English Department for their advice and support, many of the part-time native English speaking teachers for their feedback throughout the program, the Kyomuka for their administrative support, especially in the testing phases, Tamura-san and the Joho Center for their help in scoring the exams, and the Gokyoken, and especially Suzuki-san, for their/her help in the production of the video tests.

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