

Freshman English Seminar Class Goals:

A portfolio approach

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Introduction

These research notes will set forth a personal account of the process of renewal of the first semester of the Freshman Seminar class at Kyoai Maebashi Gakuen College. This class is an important part of the wider English Course curriculum because it builds the basics of skills that students will use during their four years of study. To use a metaphor, the Freshman Seminar class can be thought of as the blueprint for success for a growing English Course.

I joined Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College in the April of 2006, and, as with any new job it takes a while to become adjusted. Hence, although well supported by colleagues, a class that I found difficult was the Freshman Seminar Class. I had never taught a Freshman Seminar class in previous positions at other universities, as these classes were taught by tenured members of staff, but now I was a tenured member of staff¹, I knew the time had come to embark on teaching this important information to first year students. Although other teachers were kind enough to lend me their work; as I was new, I found it difficult to see the overall picture of the outcome to the course. In fact, it was not until the second semester² that I got a good picture of what I had been teaching in the first semester.

As a result of finding a gap between the intended knowledge that students on the English course needed to gain and the way I was teaching, I decided to take on an Action Research³ approach to the teaching of the first semester of the course. This decision was made possible by reading and researching a Communicative Curriculum (Breen and Candlin, 2003; Graves, 2003; Jennings, 2007) and incorporating into that, a good syllabus design (Kinsella, 1997; Rosen and Sasser, 1997). During the spring break, from the middle of February to late March in 2007, I began working on a plan to bring the Freshman Seminar class a more collaborative and standardised feel. The reasons for standardisation can be made thus:

1. Teachers need to know what students have studied so they can base writing and presentation work on that.
2. If teachers teach different things to students in the Freshman Seminar some students may have differing skill levels or know differing facts or use differing techniques.

3. Standardising allows teachers and students will know what to expect of each other.
4. Students need a place to keep the important information on how to, for example, format an essay, so I felt it imperative that a Portfolio approach be adopted.

Portfolios have been used for a long time starting in elementary education in the USA (Stefanakis, 2002) and are becoming widely used both as a form of gathering information in one place and of assessment in both ESL and EFL environments and in various fields, notably Second Language Writing (see Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2002; Nunes, 2004; Song, 2002; Yang, 2003). The reason why portfolios are widely used is because they lend themselves to giving learners more autonomy in the learning process, as they improve meta-cognitive strategies, for example, learners are encouraged to take more charge of what they are learning by keeping their portfolios up-to-date. As a benchmark, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (*ibid.*) ask that learners *collect*, *select*, and *reflect* the materials to be kept in their portfolios. Here however, we depart from these three tenets because; for the Freshman Seminar class, we do not have the need to select material for keeping as the materials kept will be used as a reference for further work during the 4 years of study, and as such, all the taught materials should be deemed as important.

After coming to the conclusion that a central place to keep materials for use in future study throughout university life was very important, I made a proposal at a meeting for my plans for the Freshman Seminar class. Colleagues agreed that if we were to change any part, we would need to discuss a proposed outline for changes. The planning of the outline and its subsequent re-working and further use in class is the subject of these research notes.

According to Breen and Candlin (*ibid.*), any syllabus renewal project needs to be both an on-task, and yearly cycle. Thus the stages of syllabus renewal need to contain a **planning stage** i.e. lesson planning and discussion, leading to an **actualisation stage** of lesson content and, finally, trialling the lessons culminating in a **review stage**. These three stages become the three main sections for the body of the research notes below.

Background to the Freshman Seminar Class

There follows some background to the English Seminar course. At the time that the 2 year Maebashi Kyoai Womens' College became the 4 year Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College, there were no courses just one department; native English speakers were not expected to teach the Freshman Seminar classes, however, upon foundation of the separate courses, it was deemed necessary for English course teachers to take

control of their own Freshman students as it was thought that they would know how best teach the fundamental skills necessary to undertake the study needed in the English Course.

At the same time that the varying courses took charge of their own students for first year seminar classes, it was deemed necessary for the native English speaking teachers to take a role. As a result, a 13 week semester was split roughly in the middle, between teachers teaching the core skills in Japanese, swapping with teachers teaching the core skills in English.

As of April 2006, the English seminar class was a one year course aiming to give students the fundamental points of the core skills of both English and Japanese Writing and Presentations, in the first semester. However, as mentioned above, the core skills having to be undertaken in both languages leaves a small amount of time to teach such important skills.

As a result, at a meeting, I brought up the idea of the first semester lessons I had designed being used in both the Japanese and English parts of the semester, as a form of recycling of content; in order to reinforce what was being taught. However, at a subsequent meeting it was thought that it would better to have just the teachers who were teaching the core skills of Writing, Presentation and Communication in English to initiate the trial. The main reason for this is that the core skills needed in Japanese were not covered by what I proposed for the students i.e. English Course students may also have a sizeable amount of classes in Japanese outside the bounds of the English Course so it is a must for them to learn what is expected of them in Japanese Writing and Presentations. I needed to make a plan.

1. Planning Stage

Any complex project such as this involves a lot of planning, discussion and trialling. I will endeavour to make plain this process in this section.

The first thing we did in the Planning Stage was to discuss with colleagues the need for sharing lesson content. This was done with a view to choosing which content would fit in well with the goals of the course. I then found that there were no goals of the course written down so I started to write down the type of goals for the course that I would like to see and showed this paper to colleagues at a meeting (Appendix 1 shows a draft of the goals discussed, Appendix 2 shows the finished Statement of Goals that was handed out to students). The goals I wrote were updated with input by colleagues; a consensus was reached on most of the ideas and the need for sample lesson activities to be shown.

The reader may take a brief glance at the important headings of The Statement of Goals here:

1. **Mission Statement** – a sentence showing the overall goals of the Freshman Seminar class
2. **Goals** – detailed goals
3. **Accountability** – why detailed goals are important
4. **General theory** – the reasons why accountability is important
5. **How to teach learning strategies and practical output skills** – strategies and skills are important to improve communication ability
6. **Overcoming the obstacle of varying levels** – students are not streamed in terms of ability in this class
7. **Grading** – How to grade students
8. **Reasons for a portfolio** – a portfolio is a place where students keep important documents, of which they can refer throughout their student life
9. **Syllabus** – a sample syllabus was attached

I attempted to make clear in the meeting that what I had planned was to give goals to the Freshman English Seminar class, the goals needed to be agreed in order to give coherence to this, therefore meetings were necessary to reach a consensus. Moreover, for goals; and scheduling of classes and grading to be agreed, a certain amount of standardisation⁴ is required.

The standardisation required colleagues to agree that the classes would consist of input and activities designed under the principals of the communicative language approach. The Communicative Language Approach may be characterised as being an approach where learners improve their ability by trying to communicate even when they are not confident about grammar and vocabulary.

Another important part of the explanation of the reasons why the syllabus should be standardised was ordering of the lessons. The content of the lessons were organised so as to build upon knowledge gained in the previous lesson. This concept of building on previously encountered knowledge comes from two notable scholars. The notion of *i+1* (Krashen 1982) and the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky cited in Lantolf and Appel, 2004). This ability to build upon earlier experienced input is central to learning a foreign language and, indeed, of learning itself. In order to explain, I will list the lesson topics here:

List of Lesson Topics

0. **Get to know you** – to build class cohesion⁵
1. **Difference between high school / university English lessons** – lessons taught in the English course by and large; tend to follow an approach to learning informed by the Communicative language Approach. This is often new to students.
2. **Library search** – how to search physically and through the Internet.
3. **Presentation Preparation** – Preparing an outline
4. **Presentation Preparation** – Speaking skills
5. **Presentation** – Preparation to practice
6. **Writing Skills** – Uses the presented materials to write an essay

As mentioned earlier, it was felt that to take on the project it would be better if only the teachers who were teaching in the language of English would use the materials I had designed. After this had been agreed, a “Japanese group” and an “English group” (henceforth “we”) were formed and plans were made for the Freshman Seminar classes to split into separate entities.

The first thing that we did was decide that we needed a detailed plan of lessons, one of the more pressing items on the agenda was to schedule computer rooms for presentation skills classes. I then made a draft of pertinent information in table form; this then became an evolving lesson and information schedule; see below for a list of lesson schedule headings (see Appendix 3 for details).

A list of lesson schedule headings

1. Number of Lesson
2. Lesson titles
3. Class content
4. What was needed by the teacher
5. Homework to be handed in
6. Homework to be handed out
7. Remarks

After the schedule had undergone changes of lesson order⁶ and the planned “homework to be given out” had been augmented. We embarked on the first lesson without having fully completed all of the necessary lessons for the whole semester. We thought it more practical to do as much as we could before the first class began and

prepare the other classes in a Just-In-Time fashion. This sometimes meant some late nights or early mornings preparing lessons for four colleagues and sending the material by email, or posting “ready to copy” lessons on each other’s doors. About ninety percent of the lesson materials came from lessons I prepared; about two thirds of them I had made previously for other classes, the rest had to be augmented from previously made materials so as to match the Freshman Seminar schedule (again, see Appendix 3 for details). The planning stage was complete.

2. Actualisation Stage

The process of actually carrying out the lessons themselves entailed a complex series of events, of which, I will strive to convey below. Firstly, in order to fulfil my obligations to my colleagues it became extremely difficult to keep up with the pace of making the lessons but with perseverance and the help of colleagues, I believe the lessons were a successful blend of communicative activities, being based on the topics of Communication, Writing and Presentation.

As outlined above, each class consisted of a set of information (see the *list of schedule headings* above) and a topic (see the *list of lesson topics* above). These headings and topics are very important because they became the foundation of the lessons. In preparation for each lesson, the teacher would look at what homework was to be given out, which homework to be taken in and the lesson activities themselves. Each lesson was designed to be self-explanatory, i.e. students could be guided through the lesson with a minimum of preparation by the teacher.

As mentioned above, lessons were often made on a Just-In-Time basis, this positive pressure ensured a certain brevity in instruction lines for lesson activities and a need for individual teachers to find typing errors or ask for clarification. By and large though, teachers used the materials as they saw fit. There were positive comments about clarity and ease of use of activities, coupled with a clear progression toward the final aim of covering the overall goals of the Freshman Seminar Class.

Unfortunately, as we are busy teachers and the fact that just preparing the lessons was a struggle, the need to do some sort of final check of how students perceived the lesson activities and whether they perceived that they had reached their goals, was not attended to. However, on a positive note, anecdotal evidence suggests the portfolio was deemed to be a successful inclusion because it forces students to keep the information at hand as they need to hand their binders or miss out 10% of their grade.

In closing to this section, the actuality of the lessons being carried out went more smoothly than I had dared hope. Of course there is always need for improvement,

especially the eradication of unclear instructions or typographic errors. However, part of the lesson actualisation is to make sure to gain students understanding that the lessons they took part in helped them to gain the knowledge they would need for improved Communication and basic skills in Writing and Presentation. This understanding was not achieved but will certainly be measured at the end of the coming spring semester of 2008.

Further augmentation of activities will be made using information found in the review stage, below. The aim here is to build a firmer group of class activities for the following year.

3. Review Stage

The stage of review is a very important part of the cycle needed for the Freshman Seminar class, these research notes are the first part of that process. Another important part of the process is to ask colleagues to reflect and think of ideas to improve upon the first year's trial. This is best done by gauging whether the goals of the course have been achieved or not, and is therefore extremely important. With reference to the use of portfolios earlier, what we are doing then is a sort of *collect, select and reflect* in order to improve the course. We collected together a group of activities in a linear fashion building on knowledge gained in each lesson. We selected materials that would be of direct use to students during their four years of study. While, at this juncture, in these research notes; there follows my reflections on how to improve the course.

Improvements

- **Get rid of typographic errors**

These errors crop up when the teacher involved in the making of the materials, usually on a Just-In time basis makes a typing error and is rushing to finish the activity without a spell-check. This will be easily remedied for the spring semester 2008.

- **Check for unclear instruction lines**

The meaning of an instruction line may seem obvious for the maker of the materials but colleagues and students will not on occasion have the same ability to see the intended meaning from the words on the page.

- **Change file names on the computer to the same name as the title of the activity**

For ease of reference, file names of activities stored on the computer should bear the same name as the title of the activities shown on the syllabus schedule.

- **Number each group of handouts so students will easily put them in the right**

order in their portfolios

Each group of handouts should have a numerical system to enable students to keep their portfolios in good order. The numbering system should be flexible enough to accept new materials.

- **Put the information onto Moodle**

The Moodle website (moodle.org) writes “Moodle is a course management system a free, Open Source software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities”. One of the goals of the course is that we improve the interpersonal communication skills, using the moodle website may help us create this. Therefore, I propose trialing its use.

- **Get students to upload their presentations and writing assignment to Moodle**

One of the benefits of using moodle is that students can upload their assignments to the Freshman Seminar class web-pages to; be graded by the teacher.

Improve the look of the materials:

- **Make a logo to put in a corner of the papers**

It would be nice if we made a logo for the Freshman Seminar course as a form of branding.

- **Use colour**

The use of colour in lesson activities can, for example, help students distinguish between different types of activities.

- **Use some more images**

The use of images can help students focus on a particular item of knowledge to pay attention to.

Don't forgets

- **Buy portfolio binders**

The Binders in which to keep the portfolio of information need to be bought.

- **Book the necessary computer rooms**

Booking the computer rooms on the correct days can be difficult.

Conclusions

The Freshman Seminar class is very important because it is the foundation of knowledge that prepares students for the types of study they will experience during their four years. These research notes are an attempt to show how the Freshman Seminar class has undergone a round of standardisation through collaborative work and understanding. The Freshman Seminar class is, moreover, undergoing a continuous process of renewal. This continuous process is informed by a best practice curriculum

renewal process and consists of planning, actualisation and review.

The context of the research note format is limiting, however, I believe the concept of writing specific goals for courses and instigating a collaboratively made syllabus based on sound pedagogical underpinnings is worthy form of action research and is the basis of these research notes.

It remains to be seen from empirical evidence whether the current activities have helped the freshman of 2007, but as these students move through subsequent year groups; teachers will be able to say “make a presentation outline” or “write an essay” based on agreed standard criteria that students have already had access to.

It is hoped that the skills learned in the Freshman Seminar class will remain relevant during college life and thus be the foundation for entry into the wider world after graduation.

Notes

- (1) Albeit on probation
- (2) The second semester of the Freshman English class was more straightforward, it was to teach information related to the countries from which students may choose to study on the mandatory study abroad programme.
- (3) Action Research aims to bridge the gap between theory, research and practice (Nunan, 2003)
- (4) This standardisation, I wanted to make clear, does not mean that there is any lack of on-the-spot-input for the teacher, it is just that the materials are to make sure that students have reached a set of targets by the end of the group of lessons.
- (5) The reason the first lesson in the list is marked zero is that it does not contain any material or activities directly related to the building of study skills but is essential in building class cohesion. This is because it is one of the stated goals to become a better interpersonal communicator.
- (6) “Library search” was initially later in the order

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Appendix 1

Basic Seminar First Semester

Mission Statement: “To prepare students for the types of study they will experience at university”.

Goals:

- i. Showing students that the manner of study is different to that of high school
- ii. Make students into better communicators
- iii. Showing students how to use a computer (Word, PowerPoint, the Internet)
- iv. Give students guidance on making good presentations and writing

Accountability: One of the main reasons for outlining goals is that all teachers will know what to expect from their learners in subsequent years. Also, in order for students not to say at a later date “we didn’t study” that.

General theory: We need to show:

1. How to improve interpersonal communication techniques
2. Practical examples of the presentations and writing assignments students will do in university.

How to teach learning strategies and practical output skills: Learners need to communicate with each other during each class because this is the type of learning they will experience in English classes here. Therefore, it is very important that they be able to learn to be better communicators. The difficulty for this class is the students’ varying levels.

Overcoming the obstacle of varying levels: The students must become friendly with one another. In this way, students will not mind talking to each other in their own level of English. So we must have plenty of tasks which are interesting and suitable to varying levels of English.

Grading: We may also use peer-assessment to award grades and a student reflective learning diary

1. Attendance – all students should know that if the students miss lessons they will have to make up the work 10% - 10%
2. Presentation – using the template 15% - 15%
3. Writing – using the template 15% - 15%

4. Portfolio – the portfolio should be marked by the first teacher then handed to the second teacher 10% - 10%

Reasons for a portfolio: A portfolio of work will be kept as a study aid for subsequent work in other lessons containing Internet and book-based research essays and Powerpoint presentations, all in one neatly kept place. Students will be able to access this in the second semester and, further, throughout their college life.

Syllabus

Note 1: There is a need for getting classes together in one larger classroom for computer work (Research technique, Word and PowerPoint skills) search – lesson 3 in the first part and lesson 4 in the second part.

Note 2: We should also use the “English course time”, on a case-by-case basis to teach some skills that we don’t have time for in the main lessons.

Sample Syllabus

1. Get to know you - Ice-breaking lesson. Need to handout homework.
2. A lesson showing the difference between traditional and communicative styles
3. Computer work: How to use the Internet to search books and magazines in the library then go and find the books.
4. Computer work: How to use powerpoint¹ - get classes together
5. Presentation skills²
6. Presentation
7. Help with writing – hand in writing 1/2 weeks later

Change to other teacher

1. Student and teacher expectations³

¹ Teachers should gift students a presentation on the topic of “Why study English here?”. Students then copy it with their ideas. No sounds or animation are allowed in the PowerPoints.

² For the English part, the textbook “Speaking of Speech” shows the strong link between a presentation and an essay

³ Students brainstorm what they think is expected of them and the teacher

2. Computer work: How to use the Internet to search books and magazines in the library then go and find the books⁴
3. Using the computer: Using powerpoint
4. Presentation skills in other language (are the same?)
5. Presentation itself⁵
6. Help with writing – hand in the assignment a week later

Things to do: Template lessons (Anyone is free to add ideas)

- a. Ideas for ice-breakers – Emi/Lori
- b. Difference between high school and university classes – Steve
- c. Physical and Internet search of the library – Midori
- d. Powerpoint template – Steve/Natsue
- e. Presentation skills – some skills borrowed from a textbook e.g. Speaking of Speech – Steve

We should make students aware of the keywords and similarities between presentations and writing (Example Introduction, main body, conclusion thesis statement, topic sentence and support).

- f. Writing template – Steve/Yutaka
- g. Student and teacher expectations lesson.

Things to do: Portfolio

A tick-off sheet.

We need to think about what exactly will be in the portfolio. This is difficult because it is the first time of doing it.

Appendix 2

Basic Seminar First Semester

Teacher:

Contact details:

Mission Statement: “To prepare students for the types of study they will experience”.

Goals:

⁴ Introduce “rikai.com”. Wikipedia. Culturegram Kids edition. Encarta.com ... etc.

⁵ Let’s do the same presentation as the first section, this would lighten the cognitive load.

- i. Students become aware that university study is different to that of high school
- ii. Students become better communicators
- iii. Students become better computer users (Word, PowerPoint, the Internet)
- iv. Students make good presentations and written assignments

Accountability: Clear goals help students know what the teacher expects them to do and teachers know what to expect from students.

General theory: Teachers need to help students:

1. To improve their communication
2. Understand the types of presentations and writing assignments they will do in university.

How to teach learning strategies and practical output skills: Students need to communicate with each other during each class because this is the type of learning they will experience in English classes. Therefore, it is very important that they learn to be better communicators. The difficulty for this class is the students' varying levels.

Varying levels: Lessons must have lots of tasks which are interesting and suitable to varying levels of English.

Grading:

	First Part	Second Part
Attendance – Students must attend class	10%	10%
Presentation – Students must use the presentation template	15%	15%
Writing – Students must use the writing template	15%	15%
Portfolio – the portfolio will be marked by both teachers	10%	10%
	50%	50%

What is a portfolio? A portfolio is a collection of papers in one neatly kept place. Students will keep a portfolio of work as a study aid. It will aid students' work in other lessons containing Internet and book-based research essays and Powerpoint presentations. Students will be able to access this in the second semester and, further, throughout their college life.

Appendix 3

Schedule for Freshman Seminar Classes 2007 (English Group) – First Part

Number	Topic	Class Content	Things needed	Homework to be checked	Homework to be given out	Remarks
0	Get to know you	Games	1. Game sheets 2. Portfolio	None	Reading for bridging the gap between high school and university (A and B handouts)	Portfolio handed out
1	Difference between high school / university English lessons	Difference in English teaching styles between school and university	Handouts	Student A or B handout	Basic library orientation material	Students need to do the search in pairs or small groups
2	Library search	Internet library search	1. A computer room 2. Handouts	Basic library search material	Presentation outline and outline example: <i>Why I chose to study at Kyoai</i>	Some classes will join together
3	Presentation Preparation	PowerPoint work	1. A computer room 2. Powerpoint template	Presentation outline	1. Presentation reading template 2. Presentation skills handouts	Some classes will join together
4	Presentation Preparation	Presentation skills practice	1. A computer room 2. Handouts	PowerPoint presentation needs to be ready	Presentation grading sheet	Students will practice in pairs / small groups
5	Presentation	Presentation using Powerpoint	Need to have a classroom with a projector	Monitor and check students' readiness	1. Connection between presentation and writing 2. Writing template	Students will need to use taught presentation skills
6	Writing Skills	The connection between presenting and writing is their <i>organisation</i>	1. Connection between presentation and writing - writing plan outline handout 2. Writing template	Connection between presentation and writing homework	1. Writing assignment grading scheme 2. Portfolio check information	Students will hand in portfolios (except writing homework)

要旨

ポートフォリオのアプローチ：英語コースの基礎演習

ジェニングズ スティーブン

本研究ノートは、英語コース基礎演習への「ポートフォリオ・アプローチ」の導入がいかにして行われたかを記すものである。改定後の基礎演習講座は、1年生のコミュニケーション、ライティング、プレゼンテーションの技能を向上させるべく構成されている。英語コースの学生がより統合的な知識基盤を獲得できるよう、以下に示す一連の改善がなされた。

1. 目標の設定
2. 授業活動シラバスの作成
3. 授業活動の実施
4. 目標達成の成否についての反省

こうした基礎演習の目標が達成されることにより、学生は学んだことを卒業後の仕事へと生かすことが可能となろう。