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Integrated Studies: A Course Proposal

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Introduction

Beginning in the 2013 academic year, the English Department of Hokusei Gakuen University will implement a number of significant changes in the curriculum. Among these changes is the introduction of a new course of *Integrated Studies* for select first- and second-year students. Because some students enter the Hokusei English Department with relatively well-developed English abilities, the department decided to offer *Integrated Studies* to meet the needs of those students. *Integrated Studies* will teach the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing together, as well as introduce basic public speaking/presentation, discussion and debate. This paper will describe the proposed design of this course.

Background

The English Department curriculum has a strong emphasis on English language development, especially in the first two years. For the first two years, students have two 90-minute oral English classes, one 90-minute writing class, and one 90-minute reading class each week of the 15-week semesters. All of these classes are taught by native English speakers. Students in the third year have one 90-minute English Discussion class. Elsewhere in the curriculum elective classes are available in Public Speaking/Presentation Skills, Oral Interpretation, Creative Writing, and English Debate. In addition to the skill-based classes, there are a number of lecture classes such as Intercultural Communication, Linguistics, American Fiction, British and American History, and British Culture. These, too, are taught in English by native English speakers.

This curriculum provides students with both a strong base in the basic skills and also

Key words : four skills, integrated, theme-based, task-based, content-based

opportunities to grow and develop depending on their individual interests and aptitude. This has made the Hokusei English Department an attractive choice among high school students who wish to pursue higher education in English. According to student surveys and evaluations, for most students it is a successful program.

However, over the past few years, it has become apparent that some students entering the university have already achieved a high level of ability in some or all of the basic skills that we normally work on in the main curriculum during the first two years. Most commonly, such students have achieved a high level of mastery in spoken English. This ability may have been achieved through studying or living abroad, attending a high school with a special English program, or natural aptitude. Such students have specific language needs that are best addressed with an integrated skills approach (Nunn, Lingley, & Otlowski, 2004). The *Integrated Studies* course has been created to meet the needs of these students.

Students in the regular oral English classes of the Hokusei English Department, Basic Speaking and Academic Communication in the first and second years respectively, are grouped according to student ability with roughly 5 levels in the old curriculum. *Integrated Studies* will occupy the place of the highest level class in the new curriculum. Students in this class will meet twice a week just as the other oral classes do. However, students in the *Integrated Studies* course will not be required to attend the reading and writing classes as that work will be integrated into the new course rather than being taught in separate classes.

Students are initially placed in their oral English classes through placement interviews conducted during the orientation week at the beginning of the academic year each April. The interviews are conducted between one student and one of the regular oral English teachers. The interview consists of a short interview lasting between 3 and 5 minutes. Students who would be placed in the highest level of the oral English classes will be offered the opportunity to join the *Integrated Studies* course.

In order to stay in the *Integrated Studies* course, students will have to receive the permission of the instructor as well as maintain a minimum score on the TOEFL exam. New students can join the course at the beginning of each semester if they achieve at least the minimum TOEFL score. The minimum TOEFL score will initially be set at 500 for first-year students. Since this is a pilot program, the required TOEFL scores may need to be adjusted depending on student performance.

Goals

The general aim of *Integrated Studies* is to provide advanced students with the opportunity to refine their language abilities by 1) integrating the basic four skills in a content-based environment, and 2) introducing specialized skills earlier than they are normally introduced in the curriculum. Specifically, students will be introduced to small-group discussion, public speaking, and debate.

Content-based instruction is defined by Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) as “the

integration of particular content with language-teaching aims” (p. 2). This approach will allow for the integration of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills while students are focused on acquiring and communicating information. Also, as Jordan (1997) suggests, as an alternative to courses in which skills are practiced separately, a course design that focuses on a project or research exercise serves to integrate study skills and language practice.

The specialized skills of small-group discussion, public speaking, and debate are presented in the curriculum in dedicated, stand-alone classes that teach each of the respective skills. In *Integrated Studies*, however, we envision the introduction and incorporation of these skills alongside the basic four skills. Students who wish to further develop those skills will be encouraged to continue in the stand-alone courses.

Methodology

The *Integrated Studies* course will be organized around study modules that focus on both theme-based and task-based integration (Ikeguchi, 2004). Each module will focus on a theme and will consist of readings with exercises and a writing assignment. Each writing assignment will address the development of academic writing, such as paragraph and essay organization. The reading topics and the writing assignments will be closely related, allowing students to recycle vocabulary and grammar. In order to give students the opportunity to engage in real-life communication situations, each module will also have a task, or project, that students will work on in small groups and will include the work on presentations, discussion, and debate skills.

The specific themes for each unit have not been determined, but they should be both interesting to the students and fairly academic (e.g. technology, health, environment, intercultural communication, education). Criteria for topic selection will be based on linguistic appropriateness, timeliness, and interest to the widest variety of students (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989).

Each unit will begin with readings on the topic. The readings will provide both background knowledge in the subject-area and topic-specific grammar and vocabulary. In addition to studying the language related to the topic, students will be assigned both individual and group work that will develop academic writing, critical thinking and research skills. Students will engage in small-group discussions, give presentations and debate propositions related to the theme.

For example, if we take a theme such as Technology, we could have students reading articles about how social networking services are a great convenience and communication tool, as well as articles about how such services expose us to possible invasions of privacy, identity theft, bullying, and so on. Half the class could research the benefits of social networking services, and half the class could focus on the negative aspects. Each group would then give a presentation explaining its position, and the two groups could debate a proposition related to the regulation of social networking services. Finally, each student would write an academic

essay giving his or her personal position on the topic, supporting it with reasons and evidence.

Obviously, this level of integration will require a great deal of coordination and communication between not only students and instructor but between the students as well. To facilitate this, Moodle, the online Learning Management System, will be used. The advantage to using Moodle is that it will allow flexible collaboration in a blended-learning environment, where blended-learning refers to a combination of both classroom and online elements (McNabb & Jenkins, 2012). Specifically, we will incorporate various forums in three main ways. First, each student will keep an online journal through which he/she can communicate directly with the instructor. Second, students will be able to form their own workgroups to facilitate communication on group projects. Finally, Moodle will allow the instructor to communicate with the class as a whole and distribute materials when necessary.

Conclusion

Integrated Studies will be introduced as a pilot program in the 2013 English Department curriculum in order to meet the special needs of students who enter the university with relatively well-developed English abilities. Usually these students, some of whom may have studied or lived abroad, have superior spoken English. *Integrated Studies* aims to provide those students with the opportunity to develop and refine their current abilities through integration of the four skills and to introduce them to specialized skills in public speaking, small-group discussion, and debate. The course will use both a theme-based and task-based approach that will emphasize student collaboration.

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[Abstract]

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Beginning in the 2013 academic year, the English Department of Hokusei Gakuen University will implement a number of significant changes in the curriculum. Among these changes is the introduction of a new course of *Integrated Studies* to meet the special needs of students who enter the university with relatively well-developed English abilities, particularly speaking ability. *Integrated Studies* aims to provide those students with the opportunity to develop and refine their current abilities through integration of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and to introduce them to specialized skills in public speaking, small-group discussion, and debate. This paper will describe the proposed design of this course.

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