

Insights and results from the e-learning based English Open courses
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The Department for the Promotion of Foreign Language Education within the Education Center at Kagoshima University is responsible for the ongoing development of the foreign language curriculum, and as part of this, the potential for utilization of on-line learning is currently being explored.

Since 2009 an e-learning based English Open course has been included as part of the Education center's English language curriculum, providing an alternative learning experience for second year students. Initially in 2009, a pilot study was conducted which utilized the Longman English Interactive Level 4 study program (LEI) and a comparison of post-course G-TELP results was conducted at the end of the semester-long course in order to provide a standardized indicator of the outcomes of the course. The results at the time indicated that the e-learning study group averaged 9.9 points above the two similar sized conventional English Open classes.

Student feedback on the LEI course was in the main positive, particularly in that they could study independently, work at their own pace, and monitor their progress and results throughout the semester. Some students however commented that although it was a four-skill based program, it lacked content attuned to developing their oral language ability, and had no Japanese language support within the program. With the shortcomings of the LEI program in mind I sought out alternative resources that might better cater to the needs and interests of Kadai students, particularly in their second year of the English language curriculum.

Having viewed and assessed a number of alternatives, and intending to provide the students with a more stimulating and interactive learning experience, I decided to incorporate two online programs, "English Central" and "Voice Thread" into the English open e-learning course.

English Central is a media video-based learning system which the instructor can easily manage and monitor the student's progress. It can be accessed both on and off campus, allowing students to work both in class and at home on selected content. The students proceed through the program as follows.

A) Watching video content

The more videos students watch, the more progress/achievement points accumulate. Students can learn English using thousands of videos on the web presented with text transcriptions and word definitions. In addition to free study, the instructor can select specific courses or thematic units for the students to study, for example a Video Course designed for Business, Social, Travel, English Proficiency Exams, English Pronunciation etc.

B) Vocabulary study

Each video has vocabulary drills and practice sentences for the students to expand and reinforce

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their vocabulary. This training allows students to go back and revise at any-time the vocabulary they have studied previously.

C) Speaking practice

Having listened to the videos and completed the vocab study, the last step is for students to listen and record their own speaking, with emphasis on fluency, clear pronunciation and appropriate intonation. The Intellicoach (tm) technology in the system provides the student immediate pronunciation feedback and an ongoing assessment of particular pronunciation challenges, and an ongoing archive of student's voice recordings that can be monitored by the instructor and student alike.

The English Central platform allows for the instructor to set weekly study goals for the students and for each of the three classes the goals were set at:

Watch: 5 videos

Study: 25 words

Speak: 5 videos

Time: 2.5 hours weekly (in class and home combined)

The tasks set for completion during class time were chiefly the content specific courses, whilst students were free to select their own content for self-study at home. Each student's completion rate was monitored carefully each week by the teacher. Work on English Central accounted for 40% of each student's final assessment, while 40% was for the two presentation projects on Voice Thread, and the remaining 20% for the G-TELP score.

In addition to English Central, "Voice Thread" (a free online site for creating slide presentations) was used as a platform for students to produce two slide and speech based projects that could be created and edited as a work in progress over the semester and assessed as oral presentations for final assessment. This project allowed for the instructor to work on writing, editing and developing presentations with each student individually during class time. The two projects took about one month each to complete, again with access from home and on campus available at all times. The projects allowed the students to create a visual and oral presentation in English that reflected and featured information on their interests, field of study or local region. The final products were able to be viewed by all students and the students could also down-load their completed work as video files for posterity.

The study group and class organization

The study group for semester one 2013 consisted of three second year classes; a fisheries and science mixed class (43 students) , an education class (33 students) and a mixed class of all faculties (43 students). Students were required to purchase premium content access code cards from Seikyo, and the registration process was completed in week one. To use the English Central system all students needed a headset with a microphone. The Voice Thread registration was free and access also available on and off campus. Orientation was necessary for both systems however the students displayed their 'tech-savvy' at an early stage and became familiar with the working of both programs very quickly. Class time was allocated to approximately 50 minutes on English Central, with 35 minutes on writing and editing the Voice Threads. Students could work independently at

their own pace, provided that their overall weekly goals were consistently met, and this class set-up allowed for the teacher to spend more time working one on one with individual students, particularly on writing and refining their scripts for their presentations.

Results

The researcher had anticipated that through using English Central the student's listening and vocabulary may show some improvement, given the amount of repetition, reinforcement and student time listening to real-world English. The G-TELP test was taken by all students in the 11th week of the semester, and the results for the three classes were as follows:

G-TELP results Semester one 2013	Average score for all English Open courses	Average score for fisheries and science (e-learning) 43 students	Average score for education (e-learning) 33 students	Average score for mixed faculty class (e-learning) 43 students
Grammar	58.8	69.3	68.2	59.7
Listening	50.4	55.3	55.8	53.0
Reading	67.0	71.7	73.3	68.5
Overall total	176.2	196.3	197.3	181.2

Student surveys

In order to ascertain the student's response to this e-learning based course, two student surveys were conducted, one in co-operation with English Central in week 14 of the course, and one formulated independently by this researcher and conducted in the final class of the semester using Moodle. The surveys were conducted online and all questions were in both Japanese and English.

From the survey results, student responses to the following questions were as follows:

(Total number of respondents: 68 students)

Do you feel that study using the English Central system led to an improvement in your overall English ability?

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
25%	67%	6%	2%

Do you think that the pace of the course was appropriate?

Strongly agree	Agree	Not really	Strongly disagree
60%	36%	4%	0%

Did you feel that the online course content was interesting?

Strongly agree	Agree	Not really	Strongly disagree
57%	37%	4%	2%

Do you think that you would like to study in this way via e-learning again in the future?

Strongly agree	Agree	Not really	Strongly disagree
43%	50%	3%	3%

Some student's comments on English Central:

"With grammar, vocab and listening I can get feedback on my level of ability from normal tests and so on, but English Central provided me with assessment of my English pronunciation, and this is a point I really appreciated." (Science student)

"Having the class achievement rankings displayed each week was really motivating for me." (Education student)

"I enjoyed it so much because the video content was interesting and we could view Japanese translations, and received immediate assessment as we worked through the course." (Education student)

"I liked it that there were many different levels of difficulty that we would challenge ourselves with, and that we could record our own voices to practice pronunciation." (Education student)

Some student's comments on Voice Thread (on-line presentations)

"Making a creative work like this using my own photographs was very interesting." (Fisheries student)

"I felt this was markedly better than regular English language study. The classes were enjoyable and I could work far more positively." (Fisheries student)

"It (Voice Thread) was difficult to use at first, but it made me really work on improving my pronunciation." (Education student)

"It was a great project and a great chance to speak out in English. I think it (Voice Thread) could be used in a wide range of learning environments." (Education student)

Conclusion

In comparison to e-learning courses in previous years the feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive, in addition to higher attendance rates and better quality work submitted, as is evident in their projects. Owing to the variety of its content and easy to use learning format, English Central proved to be a highly motivating influence for the student's and, as is shown in the teacher-managed score-books, I found that many of the students were working on English Central in their free time, regularly and well in excess of their weekly goals. As an instructor personally I felt that this type of e-learning course was well suited to student's who particularly enjoy working individually and find the achievement of reaching set goals to be a motivating factor in their study. The Voice Thread project allowed for the teacher to spend more time with individual students working on their written expression skills and formulating logical, informative presentations, something that time constraints in the standard large-sized class do not allow. Overall the English Open e-learning courses have provided very positive outcomes, and with further refinement in mind, I look forward to future courses of this kind becoming a learning option for many more students.