

Pioneer Advanced Placement (P-AP) Program in Ehime University : How the English course worked

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1 Introduction

Ehime University has been working in collaboration with its affiliated high school to offer various forms of college-level education to its students since the school was reorganized in 2008. In 2014 the university was selected as one of four universities across the country to promote smoother school-to-college articulation in a special government initiative called the 'Acceleration Program for University Education Rebuilding'. Under this program, the university has been trying to develop syllabi similar to College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program.

The purpose of this paper is to disclose the content of the P-AP program at Ehime University, to highlight the many successful aspects of the course, as well as detailing any areas requiring improvement for upcoming courses.

The AP program offers eager and academically motivated students the opportunity to pursue university-level courses while still in high school. These courses offer the possibility of earning credit towards an undergraduate degree or even the chance to skip introductory level university courses (College Board, 2016). Many western institutions have witnessed huge successes with the program (Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, & Klopfenstein, 2010).

At present, it is virtually impossible to incorporate every aspect of the AP program into the Ehime University project; however, despite the challenges associated with applying even a few AP features to a Japanese high school, college-level courses in English and math for high school students were successfully developed for the second

semester of the 2015/16 academic year.

As Ehime University is one of the first universities in Japan to establish this type of program, the pilot courses were given the title of 'Pioneer Advanced Placement (P-AP)'. Additionally, due to the independent nature of the development and administering of the P-AP course by Ehime University, it is completely separate from and has no affiliation to College Board and its AP program.

Although the inclusion of 'Advanced Placement' in the course title suggests similarities to the AP program, Ehime University's P-AP program actually focuses more on dual enrollment. Under the P-AP scheme, high school students attend classes at the university campus and are taught by university lecturers. Additionally, students enrolled in up-coming courses developed for the 2016/17 academic year will receive credit from the university, as well as the possibility of joint credit from their high school. These are typical features of dual enrollment programs in the United States.

Incidentally, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) set out proposals in 2011 for educational reforms with an aim to stimulate student motivation in learning English. These reforms stressed the need for an emphasis on communicative ability, as well as a focus on the ways in which mastering English can expand potential opportunities in the future. The goal was to cultivate a 'global perspective' in the English classroom with the hope of increasing motivation amongst students (MEXT, 2011, p.6). The pilot P-AP English course developed by Ehime University employed these educational reforms to

provide an English reading comprehension course with a focus on motivation, communicative ability, and providing a global perspective in the English classroom. The pilot course was a huge success and in response, Ehime University will be offering two new P-AP English courses in terms three and four of the 2016/17 academic year.

2 P-AP English Program in Ehime University

The impetus for the pilot course at Ehime University was to promote greater collaboration with local high schools. The main goals of the project were to: improve students' overall reading comprehension skills; create an 'All English' learning environment; and most importantly, to provide a unique course to promote and maintain high levels of intrinsic motivation in the students.

2.1 Reading Comprehension

The P-AP course was based on the English reading course, which is a required course for all first-year students at Ehime University. The course introduces various reading skills, such as summarizing and inferring, which the students can use to improve their English reading ability through textbook based activities. The reading course prepares the students for the common reading test taken by all first-year students, and supports an overall goal of developing a deeper understanding of the various skills, which can be used to improve reading comprehension. Additionally, the use of graded readers and a wide variety of texts and activities allows students to access English reading on a level they may not have previously encountered.

2.2 All English

The 'All English' approach stems from the basic premise that the greater the exposure to an L2, the greater the probability of learning the target language (Ellis, 2005; Lee, 2013). With a greater emphasis on test scores and grammar-translation accuracy, the more communicative aspects of English language learning can be overlooked in Japanese junior and senior high schools, to the detriment of the students' English education (Edwards, 2012; Reesor, 2003; Ryan, 2009). Comments from participating students on the post-course survey highlighted their dissatisfaction with the prevalent use of Japanese in their high school English lessons and showed that they felt they gained much more from the 'All English' approach.

2.3 Motivation

Motivation is widely acknowledged by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors influencing the rate and success of second language learning (Dörnyei, 1998). Motivation provides the catalyst for learning a second language and maintains the momentum required to sustain the learning process. With this in mind, one of the major goals of the course was to ensure that the high levels of motivation observed in the students in the first class continued through to the end of the course. This was achieved in three ways: changing partners each class, using a variety of activities and incorporating the element of music into each lesson, and the use of comment cards and lesson surveys.

Offering the students the chance to work with all of the other students in the class was paramount in creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, where the students could feel at ease interacting together in English and develop new friendships with students from different schools and backgrounds.

Providing an interactive lesson using competitive activities, which involved the students cooperating together and working to solve the various tasks ensured that the students were actively making use of the reading skills they were learning in a natural and productive way. Introducing various tasks such as gap-fill exercises, summarizing tasks, inferring quizzes, and a variety of other unique activities ensured that the students' motivation remained high for the entire 90-minutes of each lesson.

Feedback from the students on their comment cards every lesson highlighted both their enthusiasm towards the course, as well as their desire to participate further. By responding to each student's comments individually after every lesson, the teacher managed to develop a one-on-one relationship with each student, which further increased motivation. Finally, comments on the course survey conducted in week fifteen showed that all of the students were frustrated that the course had come to an end and were interested in whether the opportunity to participate in similar courses would be made available.

3 P-AP English Course in 2015

3.1 Participants

The program was made available to students from

Matsuyama East High School, a Super Global High School (SGH), Matsuyama South High School, a Super Science High School (SSH), and Ehime University Senior High School. In total, twenty-five students took part: five students from Matsuyama South High School, ten students from Matsuyama East High School, and ten students from Ehime University High School. All of the students were second-year students and the class consisted of eight boys and seventeen girls. The class also included one international student from Norway who was taking part in an exchange program at Matsuyama East High School.

3.2 Course Outline

The 15-week pilot P-AP course took place once a week on Wednesdays from 18:00 till 19:30 and followed a similar syllabus to the compulsory reading course taken by all first year students at Ehime University. The first-year reading course focuses on introducing various reading skills such as skimming, scanning, and inferring with the goal of improving the students' overall reading comprehension ability. Although predominantly based on the reading course, the P-AP course varied in many respects, catering specifically to the needs of the high school students, as well as offering a more comprehensive style lesson incorporating all four of the core language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The course utilized the 'Skills that Thrill' textbook used for the regular first-year reading course; however the lessons were supplemented with and relied heavily on a variety of unique activities and handouts used to further integrate the four core language skills into every lesson. Although there was an emphasis on improving the students' reading skills, the classes were also geared towards enhancing the students' overall communicative ability through pair-work, group work, discussion, and competitive activities.

Lesson Outline

The students sat in groups of four and remained in the same seats that they chose in lesson one for the first four lessons. This allowed the students the chance to get used to the unique lesson style and engage with classmates from their own high schools, which helped reduce anxiety, add a sense of familiarity, and boost motivation. However, from lesson five the students were randomly assigned a seat at the start of each lesson to promote interaction with other students from different schools and to offer them a chance to work with everyone in the class. Some of the students were much more proficient in English

than others, which was one of the contributing factors to the random seating arrangement. The random pairing allowed the more confident students the opportunity to work with the less confident students, which presented everyone with the opportunity to learn from each other. Each lesson followed a set pattern (detailed below), which gave the students an idea of what to expect during each lesson. Despite the group set-up, the students worked in pairs for the majority of the lesson and activities and only collaborated as a group for general discussion and homework checks.

Warm-up

Each class started with some general conversation practice to increase the students' spoken English skills and to help them relax. The students were paired up and asked to talk to their partners about general conversation topics such as movies, music, school life, and weekend activities. The warm up section introduced elements of the compulsory first-year speaking course, which highlights specific structures within a conversation that can be used to improve the flow of conversation.

Speed Reading

In order to improve the speed at which the students were reading, a short speed-reading exercise was conducted every lesson. The students read a 300~400 word passage, took a note of how long it took them to read the passage once they had finished, then answered five comprehension questions on the back of the page. The comment cards used in class provided a chart where the students could keep track of their weekly scores and plot the results on a graph, offering an easy way to observe their progress. Figure 1 is a copy of the speed-reading chart section of the comment card.

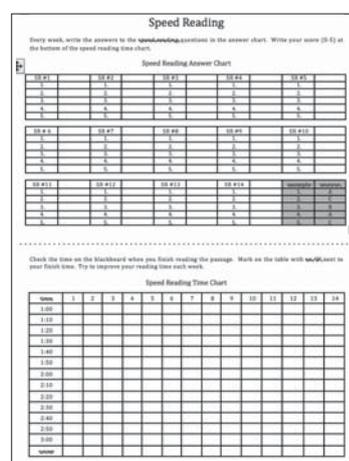


Figure 1. Speed-reading chart

Homework Check

Before commencing with the main section of the lesson, the students quickly checked their homework with their partner and other group members and had the opportunity to ask the teacher any questions or request confirmation regarding specific sections. Allowing the students to work in pairs/groups to check their homework helped foster discussion in English and reduced anxiety, which prompted a greater number of students to raise their hands to answer the questions during the whole class homework check.

Introduction of the Target Skill

Each lesson was based on one chapter from the textbook and each unit of the textbook introduced a particular reading skill, such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, and inferring. Although each lesson focused primarily on the new target skill, skills learned in the previous lessons were also incorporated into the activities section to provide greater exposure to the skills and promote combined usage of various skills. The initial two pages of each chapter highlighted the new skill and offered a few simple activities to help the students understand how to use the skill, which was the basis of each lesson. However, to offer the students more opportunity to develop all four of the core language skills, supplementary activities were used to provide the students with practice using each skill instead of following just the reading passages in the rest of the chapter.

Activities

In response to the results of the pre-course questionnaire, a greater focus on communicative ability and practice in all four core language skills prompted the departure from a textbook based lesson to a predominantly task-based, interactive lesson. After introducing the skills in the introductory pages of each chapter, the lesson moved away from the textbook and centered more on a selection of worksheets and activities used to increase pair and group communication whilst interacting with the course material. The majority of the activities were pair activities and the students could earn bonus participation points for completing the activities, which brought out their competitive streak and made each lesson much more fun and engaging. Additionally, the students worked with a new partner each week, so the stronger students could help the less confident students, ensuring that everyone had a chance to earn bonus participation points.

Husada (2013) explained that personalizing lessons with customized materials offers the teacher the freedom to blend the focal skills with the interests of the students, as well as taking into account various learning styles of the individuals. There is also greater choice, freedom and scope for spontaneity when teachers develop their own materials. Stepping away from a purely textbook orientated lesson to an interactive, task-based lesson greatly increased motivation and engagement with the material. Additionally, with a wide selection of unique activities, the students displayed high levels of motivation throughout the entire 15-week course.

Music and Lyrics

Listening plays an essential role in communication with research showing that out of the total time devoted to communicating, the act of listening makes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Mendelsohn, 1994; Renukadevi, 2014). Despite these figures and the importance of listening in communication, listening comprehension remains one of the most neglected and poorly taught skills in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Nation & Newton, 2008).

In order to tackle this problem, current chart songs were incorporated into every lesson to increase motivation, to help improve listening comprehension, and to attempt to foster an interest in English music in the students. A questionnaire regarding the students' music preferences conducted in week three showed that less than half of the students regularly listened to western music. Additionally, the majority of those students expressed an interest in the melody and music alone and placed little importance on the lyrics.

For the listening activity, the students were each given a copy of the song lyrics and were asked to fill in the gaps using the missing words given in a table at the bottom of the lyrics sheet. The students listened to the song once and had a few minutes to confer with their partner before listening to the song a second time. After listening to the song twice the answers were read out by the teacher and the students had to check whether they managed to correctly fill in all of the missing words. On the back of the lyrics sheet was an additional activity to check comprehension. The students could then make use of the various reading skills learned over the duration

(30%). All of the students successfully passed the course and the average grade was 74%, with a top score of 100% and a bottom score of 61%.

4 Results of the Student Surveys

In order to assess student confidence, expectations, and highlight any possible areas of concern, pre and post course questionnaires were conducted in weeks one and fifteen. Table 1 displays the questions used in the questionnaires along the average scores for the class; a score of '1' denoted 'strongly disagree' and '5' 'strongly agree'.

Table 1 : Pre/Post Questionnaire results

Question	Pre	Post
I'm interested in lessons conducted only in English	4.6	4.8
I am worried about lessons conducted only in English	2.8	1.8
I'm interested in lessons taught only by native English teachers	4.6	4.8
I'm worried about lessons taught only by native English teachers	2.9	1.7
I enjoy working with other classmates in pairs/groups	4.0	4.4
I am worried about working with other classmates in pairs/groups	2.4	2.2
I am confident to answer questions by the teacher in English in front of the rest of the class	3.1	4.1
I am worried about answering questions by the teacher in English in front of the rest of the class	4.1	2.2
I need a Japanese translation of the English teaching materials	2.9	2.2
I don't need a Japanese translation of the English teaching materials	3.4	4.5
I need a Japanese translation of English explanations and commands during class	3.2	2.0
I don't need a Japanese translation of English explanations and commands during class	3.0	4.2

The responses for the pre questionnaire showed high levels of motivation regarding the 'All English' style lessons; however, levels of confidence regarding the students' use of English during the lesson, as well as their confidence in understanding a lesson conducted entirely in English were low.

In accordance with the goals of the project, motivation remained high throughout the duration of the 15-week course. Additionally, as can be seen in Table 1, levels of confidence in their use of English, as well as confidence in understanding a course conducted entirely in English were higher in the post surveys and questionnaires.

Additionally, a mid-course survey was conducted in week 8 and a post-course survey in week 15 to assess student satisfaction and give the students the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings. The 14-question survey included a 4-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. Comments from the students revealed their

positive attitude to various aspects of the course.

4.1 Student Comments

Pair Work

One of the most successful points of the course was the chance for the students to co-operate with everyone else in the class and work with a new classmate each lesson.

"Changing partners every class was good because I can talk with many different people."

"I enjoyed activities with a partner because it was interesting to compete together for bonus points."

"I noticed that some of my classmates are very active, so I'd like to do the same."

Comment Cards

All of the students actively made use of the comment cards over the duration of the course and more than 80% of the students required additional writing sheets as they ran out of space after filling the two A4 pages on the comment card.

"My writing skill improved and I enjoyed talking with Chris through the paper."

"I had many chances to communicate with the teacher and get some feedback, which was encouraging."

"I was always excited to read the teacher's reply in the next lesson."

"I can communicate with the teacher, so it is very useful. Also, I can keep track of my speed-reading times."

"We can improve our writing skills by using the comment cards."

"I liked the comment card because I feel a sense of closeness between teacher and students by teacher writing comments individually."

All English Experience

Comments regarding the 'All English' style of course were very positive and highlighted the lack of emphasis on communicative skills in high school English lessons.

"I had fear before starting this class, but now I enjoy the class. In my school, there aren't 'All English' classes,

but this class is all English. Therefore, I can practice listening to English through the class. I'm happy to learn English in a university because it's a very valuable experience."

"I found this course very interesting because I can only use English which helps me concentrate more."

"I'm satisfied because I learned to use English reading skills in a real context. In school, we don't have such opportunities."

Recommendations to participate in the P-AP

All of the students commented on their desire to participate in any future classes. When asked whether they would recommend the course, they responded with:

"Yes, because it is fun, useful, and encouraging."

"Of course!! I feel I enjoy English and I don't think I am hopeless at English thanks to this course."

"Yes, I think they [peers] would like this method of learning."

"Yes, I think if your weak point is English you will become to like English by this course."

5 Discussion

Feedback from both the questionnaires and the surveys was overwhelmingly positive and stressed the students' desire to study English in an 'All English' environment, their positive attitude towards pair and group work, their consistently high levels of motivation, and their acknowledgement of the benefits of a communicative style lesson. The comments raised some valuable discussion points. Firstly, compared with the general first-year university students, the P-AP students displayed consistently high motivation throughout the course. As mentioned previously, motivation is one of the key factors that directly influences the rate and success of second language learning (Dörnyei, 1998). The 100% pass rate for the course, coupled with the extremely high levels of participation observed in each class highlight the profound effect of intrinsic motivation.

Secondly, the student's levels of English proficiency showed a marked increase by the end of the course. Confidence levels were higher, the students' willingness

to interact with the teacher in English in front of the other students was higher, and the results of the surveys indicated that the students themselves were very proud of their achievements and surprised by the vast improvement in both their communicative abilities, as well as their reading comprehension skills.

Finally, the comments from the post-course survey indicated that the course had a positive impact on the students' beliefs regarding English and English education. Compared to the standard high school lessons, the emphasis on supporting communicative ability in an 'All English' environment was acknowledged by all of the students, which has inspired many of them to participate in any further P-AP courses, as well as seek out foreign exchange programs to further develop their English.

6 Conclusion

The goals set out in the pilot course were achieved and feedback from both the participating students and the teaching staff at the participating high schools was overwhelmingly positive. However, a few points were raised which will be taken into consideration for upcoming P-AP courses. Some of the students conveyed a request to incorporate elements of TOEIC into the lessons to further aid their personal goals for the TOEIC test. Additionally, as high school lessons place a lot of emphasis on reading and reading comprehension, a course focusing more on communicative skills, especially speaking and discussion skills would be preferable. Further additions will include the development of various skills transferable to other university courses, exposure to real-life situations to further develop English as a communication tool and not just a 'subject', offer the students the opportunity to interact with other high school students in a university setting, and finally to develop communication skills not dealt with through general high school English courses.

Taking into consideration the positive results and overall success of the course combined with the requests regarding further P-AP courses, the author has developed two new P-AP courses, which will run in the second semester of 2016. The courses will focus on speaking and presentation skills, as well as reading and discussion skills with an overall emphasis on improving communicative ability. We look forward to further collaboration with local high schools and further expansion of the P-AP project.

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