University English conversation lounges

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As instructors of English speaking skills and conversation at Japanese universities constantly seek opportunities for their students to practice outside of the classroom, many institutions have established programs that simulate language immersion environments on campus. Commonly known as *English Conversation Lounges* or *English Communication Rooms*, these programs are rarely as popular with students as teachers and administrators hope. This paper will show how two universities successfully used an open discourse approach to encourage student participation.

日本の大学では、英語のスピーキングや英会話を担当する教員は、学生が課外においても練習できるような機会を常に求めており、多くの大学は、大学内でイマージョン環境を促進するようなプログラムを設置している。よく知られているのは、「英語コミュニケーションルーム」や「英会話ラウンジ」であるが、こられのプログラムは、教員やスタッフが望む程には、学生に人気がないとも言われている。本研究では,自然な会話を促すという意味の「オープン・ディスコース法」を使用することで学生のイマージョン環境への積極的な参加を促進することができた成功例として、二つの大学の取り組みを紹介する。

P ractice is essential for the improvement of foreign language speaking skills. It reduces reaction time and error rate (Anderson, 2000; Palmeri, 1999) while enhancing fluency (de Bot, 1996) and the automaticity of linguistic knowledge (DeKeyser, 1997; Gass, 1997; Izumi, 2002). Spoken output practice may also be a mechanism for second language acquisition through noticing, hypothesis formulation and testing, metalinguistic reflection, and syntactic processing (Swain, 1985; 2000; 2005).

The lack of speaking opportunities outside of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is thought to be the primary cause of the underdeveloped speaking skills of Japanese students. Therefore, university language programs have traditionally encouraged their students to study abroad for periods

ranging from a few weeks to a year. While the programs are effective in improving speaking fluency (Freed, 1995; Meara, 1994), the financial and social costs these programs entail remain prohibitive for most students. Being aware of this, tertiary-level administrators and student organizations have created programs that attempt to simulate study abroad environments based on the Interaction Hypothesis, the belief that participating in conversational interaction facilitates the language learning process (Gass & Mackey, 2006; Long, 1996).

The most common type of English conversation lounge used at Japanese universities follows what we refer to as the *structured* approach. These 1-hour sessions are often organized as a weekly activity coordinated by English Speaking Societies (ESS clubs). They are learner-moderated, timed, and use a group discussion format. In one typical program, native English instructors at the university are invited to participate after school once or twice a semester by current or former students who are ESS members. In the first 10 minutes, the teacher is asked to speak about a specific theme, such as their hometown or overseas travel experiences. In the next 10 minutes, the students, who typically number from four to nine, will ask the teacher questions about what was said. In the next 20 minutes, the students will each take turns talking about the theme. The teacher and other students ask questions after each student has finished. In the final 20 minutes, the teacher will be requested to give corrective feedback on the language used by students and to provide advice on further improving their English skills. This rigid discussion format is what these students prefer and any deviations by the teacher from the

content or scheduling is frowned upon. Also, students have to join the ESS club to participate in the discussion. While definitely student-centered and effective for those present, this format would not work well for large groups.

The other English conversation lounge format that can be found at Japanese universities employs what we refer to as the *open discourse* approach. These programs are organized by the administration and are typically open to all of the students at a school who are interested in spoken English practice. The basic concept is for students and teachers to select a variety of topics for open-ended discussions. While sitting in a loose circle with the students, the teacher's role is to actively moderate the discussion. Unfortunately, these programs often suffer from a lack of student participation because they are scheduled during normal class periods. They are also a cause of low morale among teachers as many only participate due to contractual obligations. At one large university in the Kansai area, all limited-term full-time native-speaking EFL instructors are required to staff a conversation lounge for one class period a week. With many teachers available at various times throughout the day, a schedule is posted on the door to inform students of when the room will be open. The teachers staff the room for the 90-minute period and wait for students to come. Teachers who are more popular with students will have more participants, typically up to seven, while those who may be stricter in their classes may receive none. Whether or not any students choose to visit, the teacher must remain in the room for the entire duration.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both formats. One advantage of the structured approach is that it works

well with mixed levels because conversations are mainly directed to the teacher, who can adjust the language level to suit individual students. An advantage of the open discourse approach is that schedules and topics for discussion can be posted for all students to see, which allows them to pick and choose the teachers and topics they prefer. The disadvantage of the structured approach is that many students will not like the rigid and focused style of discussion. The disadvantages of the open discourse approach are that teachers often feel forced to participate and there is a high cost of labor involved for the school.

The authors of this article investigated the best means of implementing English conversation lounges within their university contexts. An ongoing English speaking program at Kyoto Sangyo University and a new program created in 2006 at Kyoto Notre Dame University were examined for this purpose. The conclusion reached was that the style most likely to succeed is a slightly different version of the open discourse approach in which students speak to each other in pairs or small groups. These groups may include a native speaker to converse with in English on self-selected topics. This paper will show how this modified open discourse approach was received by teachers and students.

KSU English conversation lounge

Kyoto Sangyo University (KSU) has a student population of 12,949. English language skills development is an important component in the curriculum of the Faculty of Cultural Studies, which has 1,013 students. All students in the department must take four separate English skills courses and several English electives in their 1st year of study and then a multi-skills course and additional electives in their 2nd year.

To provide students with an additional opportunity to practice their spoken English, the department administration decided to hold a weekly *Lunchtime English Chat* soon after the department was established in the year 2000. The activity is held on Mondays during the lunch hour from 12:15 p.m. to 1:15 p.m. in a centrally located meeting room. There are two full-time native English speakers in the department faculty and they were asked to volunteer their time for the weekly conversation activity on an alternating basis.

The lunchtime chat follows the modified open discourse approach, with the teacher bringing several ideas for possible topics only for the purpose of getting conversations started. Student participants are free to change the topic and direct the conversation to match their interests. As there is only one native-English speaking teacher available at each session, it is sometimes necessary to have students form smaller groups and speak English amongst themselves.

To inform students about the activity, it is announced by teachers during the first week of the semester in required English language classes. Additionally, the department office posts a sign in the corridor near the meeting room to remind and invite the students on each Monday.

Student attendance data was collected in the spring 2007 semester. The lunchtime chat was held a total of nine times. It was not held during the first several weeks of school because of student advisement meetings nor during the last week of classes when many exams were scheduled. This semester also contained several Monday national holidays.

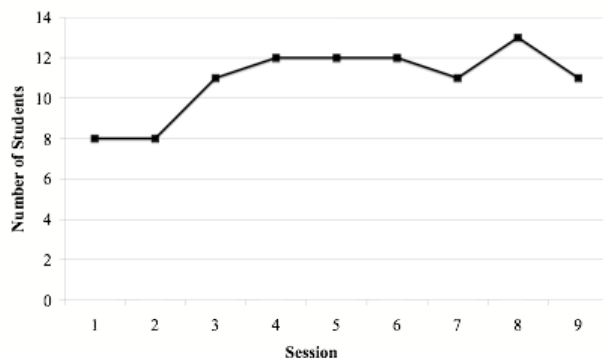The number of students attending each session ranged from 8 to 13 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. KSU English conversation lounge overall attendance

Figure 2. KSU English conversation lounge individual student participation

There were 26 individual students who participated during the semester (Figure 2). Of these, 14 attended only one session. In contrast, there were 11 students who attended six or more sessions and two students who came to every session. The majority of attendees were 1st-year students and those who attended multiple sessions tended to be those who came with one or more friends.
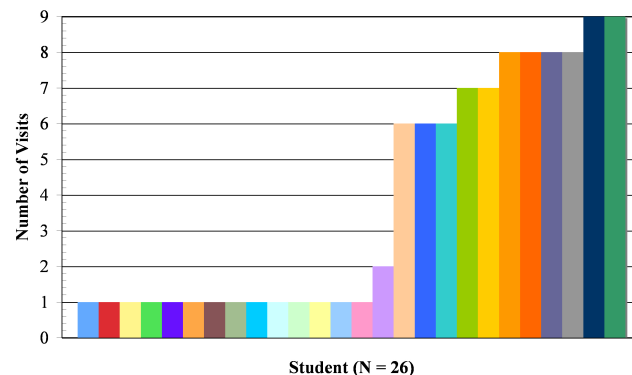
The most popular student-generated topics of discussion have included the unique characteristics of their different hometowns, upcoming university events, and the advantages of studying abroad in different countries. Several of the most spirited sessions were those in which an exchange student from New Zealand also participated.

KNDU pilot study 1

Kyoto Notre Dame University (KNDU) has an enrollment of 1,720, with 423 students in the Department of English Language and Literature. An initial study was conducted at KNDU in the spring semester of 2006 to see how popular an English conversation lounge would be as one had never been created there before. The modified open discourse approach

was chosen to be most likely to succeed for two reasons. First, no funding or any other form of compensation was made available. Second, to make the program as appealing as possible, a relaxed format in which both teachers and students could sit and talk about whatever they wanted was thought to be most desirable.

As there was no way to estimate the number of students and teachers who would actively participate in the new program, only English department students were invited to take part in the initial pilot study because it was assumed that they would be most likely to be interested in it. To make the activity accessible to more students, the lunch period was determined to be best since no classes were scheduled at that time. At KNDU, the lunch period is 55 minutes, from 12:15 p.m. to 1:10 p.m. Assuming that teachers and students who purchase their lunch will need extra time, the official period for what was called *Lunchtime English* was made to be for 30 minutes, from 12:30 p.m. to 1:00 p.m., every weekday.

Advertising for the Lunchtime English program was done by required course teachers in class. Flyers with the times, location, and dates written on them, as well as more information provided in a simple question and answer format were distributed (Appendix). These flyers were also posted in strategic locations around the school, including bulletin boards and in classrooms used by the English department. A large poster was placed in front of the room to be used for the activity.

There were a total of 20 sessions offered between June 19 and July 14, 2006. During that period, an average of eight students and three full-time native English-speaking teachers out of the seven in the English department and university

Language Center came to each session (Figure 3). While only two students came on the first day, the number of participants rose gradually to a high of 17 before declining at the end of the semester, possibly due to students becoming busier with test preparation and term paper deadlines. There was an even mix of freshman and sophomore students attending, with no juniors or seniors ever present. Both the teachers and students all reported enjoying the activity.
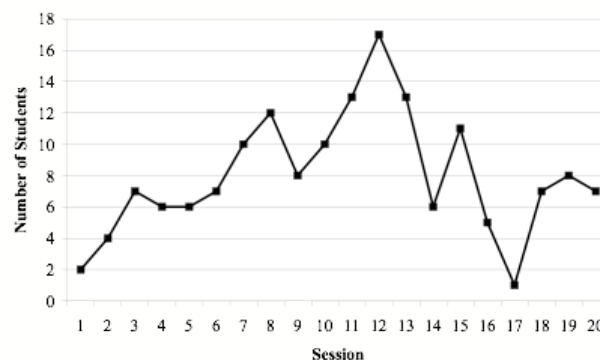

Figure 3. KNDU English conversation lounge pilot study 1 overall attendance

KNDU pilot study 2

Because of the encouraging results from the spring semester, it was decided to continue the program in the fall. Advertising was conducted in the same manner as in the first pilot study. While Lunchtime English was originally scheduled to be held every weekday from October 10,

2006, to January 19, 2007, a sharp reduction in the teacher volunteer rate occurred after the first 21 sessions. Between three to seven teachers had been volunteering on any day, however, the number had declined to one or two. When queried, all teachers voiced fatigue as the reason for reduced attendance. A plea was then made for the participation of full-time nonnative English language teachers, most of whom had not offered any assistance up to that point. Even though they would have been motivating examples of English-speaking role models, their attendance remained sporadic. While the average student participation rate had not suffered, it was decided to change the frequency of the program from every day to the lunch periods on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. This brought the native-speaking teacher volunteer rates back to previous levels.

In all, there were 43 sessions offered during the period. The average number of students per day increased from 8 in the previous semester to 13 (Figure 4).

A sign-up sheet was introduced to keep track of the number of times individual students participated in the Lunchtime English program (Figure 5). While 54 individual students came, this program was not popular with upper division students and they made up less than 10% of the total number of participants. The rest were evenly divided between freshmen and sophomores. The average number of visits per student was 11. While information about the program had spread to students in other departments through word of mouth, they made up less than 5% of the total.
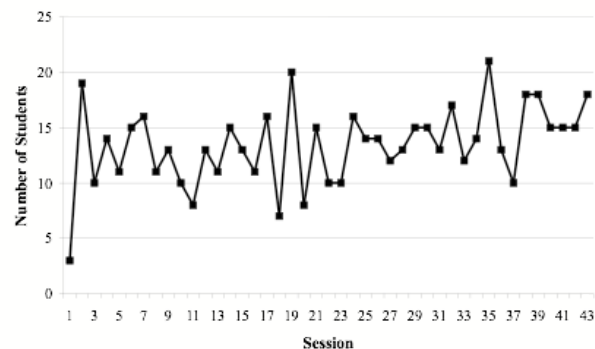

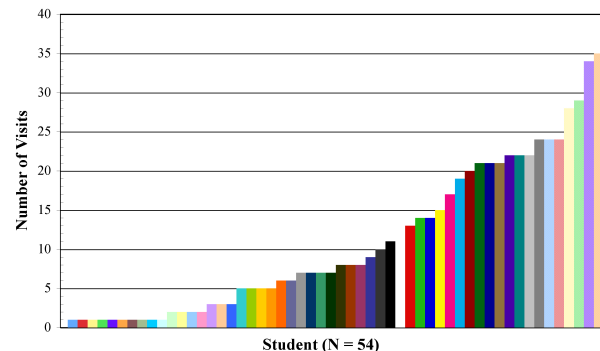**Figure 4. KNDU English conversation lounge pilot study 2 overall attendance**

Figure 5. KNDU English conversation lounge pilot study 2 individual student participation

KNDU pilot study 3

A third pilot study was conducted from April 23 to July 20, 2007, to continue to investigate the feasibility of this program in a new school year. It followed the same weekly schedule and advertising was done in the same manner as before, with the addition of an announcement being made during freshman orientation. It became an unexpected success, which resulted in the number of participating students surpassing the seating capacity of the room. The teachers and students who had participated in the program from its inception started to complain about not being able to sit down while eating. A rule was eventually implemented which allowed entry to only the first 30 students who came.

   A record of the number of student participants was kept (Figure 6). There was an average of 23 students a day over the 35 sessions offered. The higher number of students can be attributed to the large number of freshmen who were interested in the program, which made up more than half of the group on any day. The number dipped in the second session because of a school sponsored overnight event. Teacher volunteer rates remained steady, with between three and seven continuing to spend their time chatting with students in English over lunch.
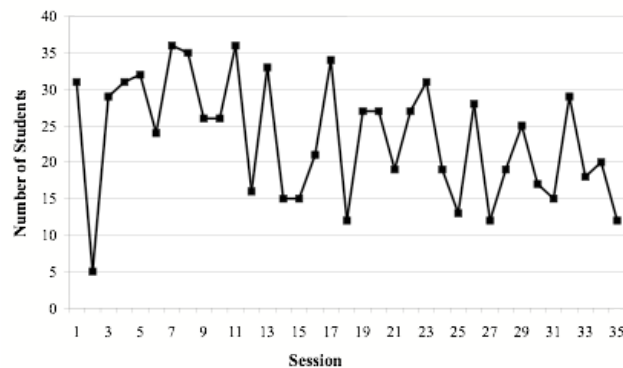

Figure 6. KNDU English conversation lounge pilot study 3 overall attendance

   As in the previous pilot study, a record was kept of individual student participation at Lunchtime English (Figure 7). A total of 127 students participated, most of whom were from the English department. The average number of visits by students was seven. Some students who had participated during the previous school year continued to come, which raised the number of sophomores, who then accounted for 25% of the total, and juniors, who made up 10%.
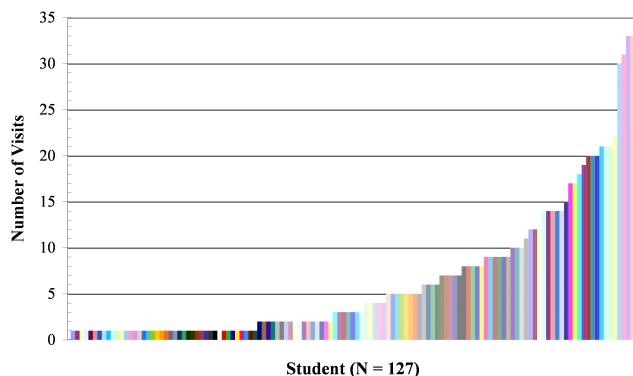
Figure 7. KNDU English conversation lounge pilot study 3 individual student participation

Discussion

Informal interviews were conducted with both teachers and students who participated in the Lunchtime English programs at the end of each semester. They included questions on the effectiveness of the program and solicited suggestions for improvement, for which there were none, other than a desire by students for the number of participants allowed into the program to be reduced, thereby increasing their chances for contact with native speakers. However, the students also reported that they did not mind speaking to each other in English and that they believed it is useful for improving their English speaking ability.

Lunchtime English programs were designed to provide an opportunity for students to speak in English and some potential problems were anticipated. Instructors were asked not to use student attendance at Lunchtime English as a form of punishment, homework assignment, or for extra credit. The point of Lunchtime English was not for students to meet any extrinsic objective, but rather to satisfy and promote intrinsic motivation. While there were some students who did not want to speak in English with each other and only wanted to speak with native speakers, this was not always possible. These students were the first ones to stop attending.

Participation in the KSU and KNDU English conversation lounges did not mean that students were speaking in English for the whole time. The program was devised to simulate what Japanese college students typically do during their lunch hour, therefore some students do occasionally type messages on their cellular phones or study for English classes by themselves. This was allowed, as observations showed that students never did this for the entire period and were speaking in English for more than half of the time they were there.

There were students in the KNDU Lunchtime English program who went almost every day. They were the most displeased when the schedule changed from five times a week to three times a week. Students tend to sit in the same spots and with friends from the same grade and English speaking ability. Some teachers prefer to talk to the same students when they come, while others like to constantly move around the room and speak to different people. A few take a random seat and talk to those students who happen to be around them. While all teachers in the English department are supportive of the program and wish it to continue, asking them to attend more often has proven to be difficult.

Some students occasionally went to Lunchtime English expecting it to be a tutoring service. While universities in Japan should set up programs for this type of assistance, this was not the purpose of Lunchtime English and separate arrangements were made for these students.

Conclusion

This paper first discussed the ideas behind simulated English immersion environments before describing the two most common formats found at Japanese universities. This paper then examined one existing English conversation lounge and discussed the results from three pilot studies that investigated the feasibility of a program at another university.

The Lunchtime English programs at Kyoto Sangyo University and Kyoto Notre Dame University are successful for three reasons. First, the activity was scheduled during a time when students and teachers were most likely to attend. Teachers and students all have different class schedules during the day and any free speaking activity would need to compete with extracurricular activities and part-time jobs if held after school. The modified open discourse format, which allows students and teachers to discuss topics they would naturally talk about in their native languages, is also the most appealing. Finally, properly advertising the existence of the program has been determined to be necessary for its continued popularity.

The KSU Faculty of Cultural Studies Lunchtime English Chat is an established program that works well for a moderate-sized department and two faculty member participants. The KNDU Lunchtime English program is good for large numbers of students with few available teachers. Because of their voluntary nature, these programs do not cost universities anything. This is important since colleges are being challenged in recent years with declining student enrollments and tightening budgets.

Teachers who want to set up English conversation lounges such as those described in this paper should remember to be patient. Student word-of-mouth advertising is very important and it will take a considerable amount of time before the number of participating students increases.

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Appendix

KNDU *English Conversation Lounge* **advertisement flyers**

Lunchtime English

Would you like to practice speaking in English?

(YES)   NO

Then please come to the English Chat Room!

Where: **English Department Meeting Room (Theresa 3F)**

When: **April 23 to July 20, 12:30 – 13:00 Every Monday Wednesday Friday**

Question: Can I bring my lunch?
Answer: Yes, of course!

Question: Who will be there?
Answer: Anyone who wants to practice speaking in English.

Question: How much does it cost?
Answer: It's free!

Question: Can I speak in Japanese?
Answer: No, you may not.

Question: What can we talk about?
Answer: Anything you like!

If you have any more questions, please send an email to:
oneill@notredame.ac.jp (Byron O'Neill)

Lunchtime English

When is Lunchtime English starting up again?

It'll be from **October 8th** to **December 21st.**

Same time? Same place?

Uh-huh! From **12:30** to **1:00.** Every **Monday, Wednesday,** and **Friday.** In **Teresa,** on the **3rd floor.**

If you have any questions, please send an email to:
oneill@notredame.ac.jp (Byron O'Neill)