Textbook Revision in the EDC Context: Readability and Topic Interest

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ABSTRACT

The present paper provides a brief overview of the principles behind Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) with specific regard given to those applied to textbook development and in particular the revision of homework readings. The process and rationale for revision and standardization of lexile thresholds and readability targets of these readings are provided. A pilot study into textbook topic interest is then outlined. The pilot study's findings were consistent with similar research into topic interest among EFL students at universities in Japan, suggesting that these results may be useful in future textbook development. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research into materials development in the EDC context.

INTRODUCTION

Hurling (2012) states that the English Discussion Class (EDC) program at Rikkyo University builds upon guidelines set forth by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (MEXT) in a 1992 directive titled *The Course of Study for Senior High School*. This directive aimed to produce "cosmopolitan Japanese" with positive attitudes towards communicating in English (Gorsuch, 2000, as cited in Hurling, 2012).

The creators of the program saw fluency development "as being the most important aspect of language to develop in classes" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1.2). Hurling (2012) further details the EDC approach based on maximizing real-time, meaningful interaction through small class sizes prioritizing student talk time and repetition of content and target language. This approach was derived based on arguments that a high amount of speech production in a controlled environment is necessary for developing communicative competence and sustaining use in a normal context. Hurling (2012) cites a number of researchers who support this approach, in which "learners can focus on the rules and the strategies needed for smooth discussions […] as well as being provided with ample opportunities to communicate meaningfully in less-structured contexts" (p. 1.2). This blend of the "direct" and "indirect" approach forms the backbone of the EDC approach, which through a focus on fluency and the ability to discuss a range of topics in English further aims to create learners who are "confident and capable communicators" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1.2).

With EDC's broader goal of improving students' overall communicative competence in mind, it is important to emphasize, as Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995) have, "that the application of any theoretical model of communicative competence is relative rather than absolute" (p. 30). Any working model and the principles derived from them "must be compatible with the local context" (Richards, 2006, p. 15) and be further adaptable to student needs and the program at large. Context specific aims, therefore, were derived from a wider body of theory and research regarding second learning. Hurling (2012) outlines 26 cognitive, seven affective, and four practical objectives derived from relevant theory and research.

EDC uses an original textbook, *What Do You Think? Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion*, designed by the course creators to meet course aims and objectives. Each textbook consists of twelve units divided into three sections of four units each. In each block of four units, the first three introduce new target language in the form lexical clusters that satisfy some number of the cognitive, affective, or practical objectives laid out by Hurling (2012). The fourth unit in each four-unit block introduces no new target language and concludes with discussion questions

used for a discussion test, the most heavily weighted means of assessment in the course. Students complete a brief, topic-related homework reading assignment as to prepare for every class.

As EDC is a communicative, discussion-based course, the purpose of these readings is to build topic familiarity, activate schemata, and provide content that can be used during in-class discussion. Original textbook topics were selected in consultation with English Language Program professors in line with EDC's course aims. It was important to choose topics in which students would have a general interest, as topic interest has been shown to directly impact situational willingness to communicate (WTC) (Aubrey, 2010; Kang, 2005; McIntyre et al. 1998), an important feature of any speaking course. Homework readings are therefore written to be easily comprehended rather than promote reading skills. Each reading is preceded by "Before Reading" questions, the purpose of which is "to help raise students' interest in the topic of the reading" and "should activate students existing knowledge of the topic [and] help students connect their own lives to the topic" (Center for English Discussion Class, 2015, p. 86). Each reading is also followed by a set of "After Reading" questions which are designed to connect their own experiences to the topic as well as review ideas from the reading that will be recycled during in-class discussions. This configuration follows Nation's (2001) principle of meaning-focused output, wherein the content read can be carried over to aid in other language skills.

Four versions of the EDC textbook have been developed to accommodate the four proficiency levels of students within the course. Books I and II are designed for Levels I and II, while Books III and IV are designed for Levels III and IV. Upon entry into Rikkyo University, all students are required to take the TOEIC for placement in their first year English courses, and so specific TOEIC bands are used to place all student in one of EDC's four levels. Each level's textbook undergoes annual revision as a component of program maintenance and development. This revision process is informed by program-wide instructor feedback as well as the best and most currently known research in the fields of second language acquisition and materials design. Once feedback has been formally collected, Program Managers (PMs) make revisions at both the unit and activity level. With each new edition of the textbooks, PMs attempt to standardize unit components, including homework readings, in a principled manner.

READABILITY

During the textbook revision of *What Do You Think? Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion 2, 6th Edition 2* (Lesley et al., 2016) all homework readings were revised and standardized using a combination of *Vocabprofile* (Cobb, n.d.) and the Flesch-Kinkaid readability formula following the principle that such readings "should be accurately graded to the students' level" (Center for English Discussion Class, 2015, p. 86). During this revision, current PMs followed Hurling's (2012) six principles for materials development adapted from Kumaravadivelu (2003). These principles state that EDC materials should be practical, brief, consistent, appropriately graded, "clearly aligned with course goals and objects" (p. 1.6), and "reflect what is currently known about second language learning processes" (p. 1.6). Two versions of each homework reading underwent this revision: a higher level reading used in Books I and II, and a further simplified, lower level reading used in Books III & IV.

Simplified texts created for an audience of English language learners are considered to be superior to authentic texts for L2 readers for several reasons. They contain fewer low-frequency terms, are syntactically less complex, and are more cohesive (Crossley et al. 2007). Such input is far more comprehensible than authentic texts (Allen & Widdowson, 1979), as has been shown by numerous studies (Crossley et al., 2011; Crossley & McNamara, 2008) such as those conducted by Long and Ross (1993) and Yano, Long, and Ross (1994). Texts created for a particular course

or teaching context can also be tailored with learner variables in mind.

An exhaustive study by Chujo (2004) found that most textbooks commonly used in junior high school and high school English classes in Japan require a vocabulary level of 3,000 words, while college entrance examinations for private universities could reach as high as 6,300 words. Laufer (1989, as cited in Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010) found that an academic level of reading comprehension requires 95% lexical coverage (i.e. 95% of word tokens in a text must be known). A later study by Hu and Nation (2000) found similarly that 95% allows for adequate comprehension while 98% is optimal. In a comparison of these studies, Nation (2001) concluded that 95% "is likely to be the probabilistic threshold" for a "minimally acceptable" (p. 147) degree of comprehension. Indeed, thanks largely to these hallmark studies, many researchers in the field of vocabulary mark 95% as the threshold for meaningful input (Chujo, 2004; Chujo & Utiyama, 2005).

Text coverage targets for homework readings for the most recent version of *What Do You Think?* were therefore set to keep the first 3,000 most frequently used words at 95% or above, with the first 2,000 constituting at least 90% for good measure. Tokens of higher frequency words, the Academic Word List (AWL), and off-list words (i.e. words that are not on the AWL) were allowed to constitute, cumulatively, up to 5% of any given reading. These targets were at times hard to ensure, and so allowances were made for repetitive AWL or off-list tokens, such as names of people or places, that were specific to the reading topic. Assuming that the majority of first year Rikkyo students have completed MEXT's required level of high school English before entering the university, this amount of coverage should ensure an adequate degree of comprehension for all students enrolled in the course.

In addition to vocabulary coverage, Flesch-Kincaid readability scores were derived by examining the range of TOEIC reading scores by level for the incoming class of 2015. The Flesch-Kincaid formula measures readability by counting syllables per word and words per sentence. Texts are scored 1-100, with a higher score corresponding to simpler and more readable texts. This formula was chosen primarily for its ease of use and to ensure uniformity between readings within each version of the text. Outliers and scores for those students who tested out of the compulsory English courses were discounted. This analysis yielded a range of 58-70 from Levels I to IV. An effort was made to revise higher level readings to occupy the lower half of this range, and for lower levels to occupy the upper half. While these targets could not always be met, deviations were minimal and in all cases the lower level reading had a higher Flesch-Kincaid score compared to the matching higher level reading.

Limitations of Applying the Flesch-Kincaid in the Current Context

The 58-70 range is somewhat out of keeping with Browne's (1996) analysis of sample passages from 11 commonly used textbooks in junior high and high school English classes in Japan, which had a range of 63.31-84.58 and averaged 76.13. However, nothing is known about if and how the publishers of the 11 texts ensured readability on their own. Additionally, current editions of these textbooks may have changed dramatically. Considering Kobayashi and Kitao's (2010) pilot study, which found that "students who have studied senior high school English textbooks can read the same level of graded readers" (p. 9), data on the readability of contemporary textbooks would be valuable for future revisions to the homework readings in the EDC textbook.

Despite their wide use, traditional readability formulas like the Flesch-Kincaid have been roundly criticized in both L1 and L2 reading research for their failure to account for cognitive processes and text cohesion (Crossley et al., 2007; Crossley et al., 2008, McNamara et al. 1996). Studies by Brown (1998) and Carrell (1987) demonstrate that traditional readability formulas like

the Flesch-Kincaid fail to account for rhetorical structure, syntactic complexity, propositional density, and learner related variables such as age and L1 background. Brown's study was performed with 2,298 Japanese university students, and so its findings are relevant here insofar as they indicate that the Flesch-Kincaid formula yields inaccurate predictions of reading difficulty for Japanese students in particular. However, a similar study by Greenfield (1999, cited in Greenfield, 2004) found the Flesch-Kincaid formula to be at least as reliable in predicting English text difficulty for Japanese university students as for native speakers, although this study's participants numbered only 200.

For these reasons, the Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index based on findings of Crossley et al. (2008) and Crossley et al. (2011) may be a good alternative to the Flesch-Kincaid when grading and standardizing homework readings in future revisions of the EDC textbook. This formula, which uses indices for word overlap, word frequency, and syntactic similarity, was found to be more accurate in measuring actual readability than the Flesch-Kincaid. Barring that, it would serve the program to devise some way to measure whether or not these revisions, in keeping with the theory and research on which they are grounded, are indeed more readable for EDC students.

TOPIC INTEREST PILOT STUDY

Nation (2009) argues that L2 reading should be connected to other aspects of language use and keep learners motivated. As EDC is a discussion based course, the end goal of the homework readings is to better prepare students to discuss the given lesson topic during in-class discussion by building topic familiarity and interest. While it is widely accepted that motivation has a bearing on WTC (McIntyre et al. 1998; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, 2012), topic interest has also been found to directly impact students' situational WTC (Aubrey, 2010; Kang, 2005; McIntyre et al. 1998). Aubrey (2011) suggests that teachers gain an understanding of what topics interest their students in order to "harness […] latent WTC," (p. 240) as well as giving students some measure of control over course content.

To this end, a pilot a pilot study collected responses from 98 EDC students on topic interest of the course textbook for the spring semester, and 95 students for the Fall semester of the 2015 academic year. With 4,449 and 4,434 students completing the Spring and Fall semesters of EDC respectively, the size of the dataset yielded results outside of the acceptable margin of error with confidence intervals around 10 percentage points for each survey item. (Respondents could opt out of items if they were absent or could not remember the day a given topic was discussed.)

Students were asked to rate each textbook unit's topic on a Likert scale ranging from one 1 (very uninteresting) to 4 (very interesting) via a written questionnaire distributed in the final lesson of a 14-lesson semester. Students were allowed to reference the textbook to aid in memory recall of the topics.

RESULTS

The findings of this pilot study are summarized in Figures 1 and 2.

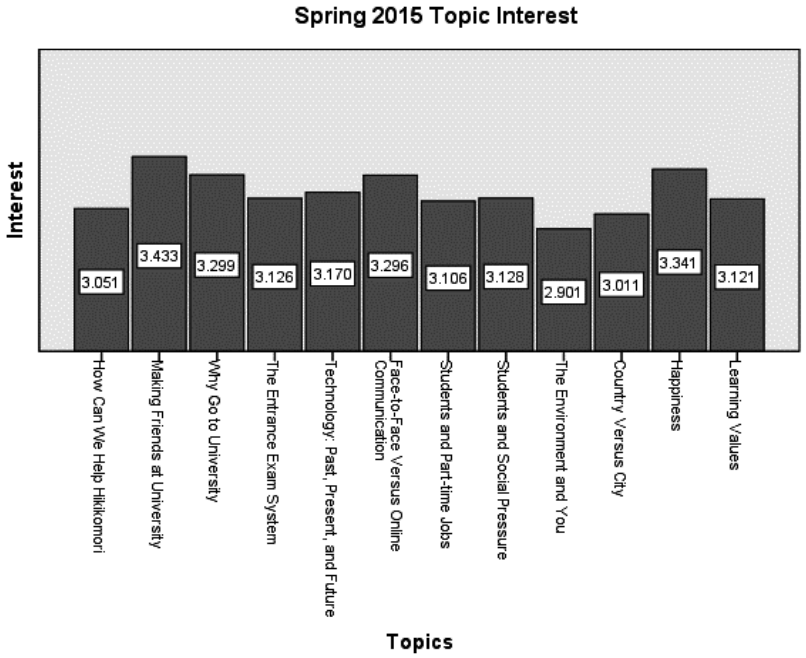

Figure 1. Spring 2015 topic interest

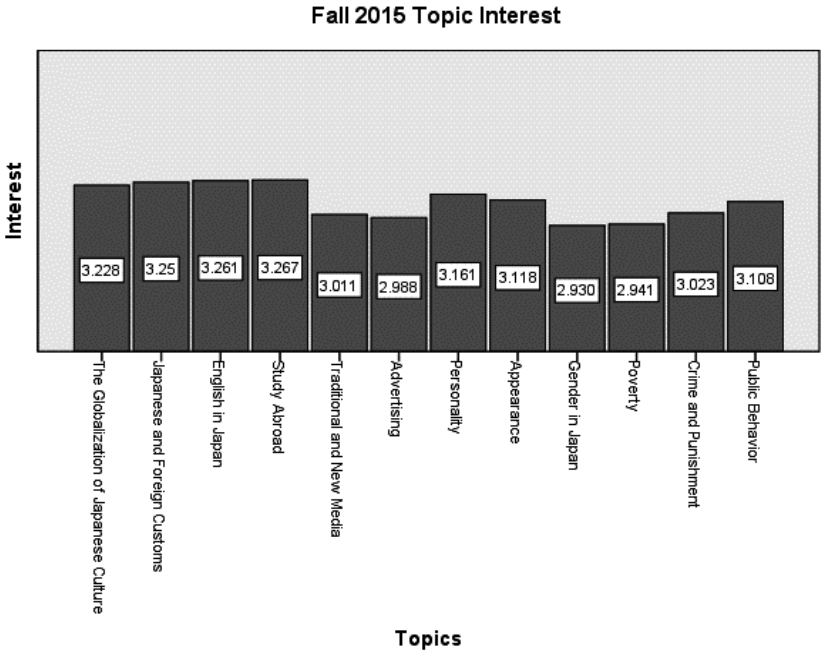

Figure 2. Fall 2015 topic interest

DISCUSSION

Few similar studies have been conducted to date, though the current findings are somewhat consistent with Wolf (2013), who compared topic interest between textbook and student generated topics among 101 EFL students at a Japanese university. He found that the most highly rated topics in terms of interest were classified as law/government and school/education. Furthermore, in an examination of student-generated topics using Conversation Analysis of roughly 37 hours of transcribed student-to-student talk from a pool of 30 students at a Japanese university, Siegel (2014) found that her participants preferred those related to academia and students' lives at school over all other topic categories.

Wolf's (2013) and Siegel's (2014) respective taxonomies have little overlap with each other and nor do they perfectly correlate to the list of EDC topics. However, a brief examination of Figures 1 and 2 above reveal one key point of uniformity. The first and third most highly rated topics by students in the pilot study for Spring semester were "Making Friends at University," and "Why Go to University?" respectively, while the first and second most highly rated topics for Fall semester were "Study Abroad" and "English in Japan." All four of these topics would be classified as school/education under Wolf's (2013) taxonomy or academic life under Siegel's (2014). It should be further noted that the participants in Siegel's study represented 10 countries, while the majority of Wolf's were presumably all or mostly Japanese. Regardless, the findings of the current pilot study, as well as Wolf's (2013) and Siegel's (2014) taxonomies, are useful for framing and expanding similar future research within EDC.

Such research into topic interest in EDC should survey a larger set of respondents to yield more reliable results. An additional limitation to consider is that each survey for the pilot study was administered during the final lesson of the semester, and so students may have struggled to recall how interested they were in topics from earlier in the semester. A fuller study should attempt to collect data at more regular intervals throughout the semester. Furthermore, such research should add extra dimensions of topics that have been shown to have an impact on WTC. One notable dimension is topic familiarity (Kang, 2005; Zuengler, 1993). Further, the dimensions of perceived difficulty and importance included in Wolf's (2013) survey could be explored. From these results, meaningful and principled topic changes within EDC can be made.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to outline the process and rationale by which EDC Program Managers apply principles and standards to ensure consistent readability to the textbook's homework readings. Additionally, the pilot study discussed above shows promising results for future investigations into topic interest for materials development within EDC, as these findings are consistent with similar available studies. However, it would benefit the program to extend and refine this pilot to collect more reliable and meaningful data.

Homework readings make up but one aspect of the EDC textbook. The most important components of *What Do You Think? Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion* are those that are used in class. As for these in-class components of the textbook, EDC and its students would like benefit from a finer grain of detail applied to Hurling's (2012) principles for materials development derived from Kumaravadivelu (2003). The revision process of the textbook should reflect the development of curricular principles generally, while still adhering to the original objectives of the course and furthering overall course goals. PMs strive to apply such principles to all areas of the textbook and every aspect of the revision process.

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