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Integrating a University Language Curriculum: Why and How?

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Abstract

Many university English programs seem to be arbitrarily put together with very little cohesion among the various classes and little to no collaboration among teachers. Moreover, the content covered in one class is often unrelated to that of other classes. In other cases, class content is virtually identical, although student age and ability are quite disparate. This paper discusses the implementation of an integrated English-language curriculum in the English department of a private university in Japan. Within this curriculum, integrated courses promote all four skills, set out clearly defined expectations for students and recycle language among classes as well as from one year to the next. Initially, the general nature and benefits of an integrated curriculum will be explained. Following this, a more detailed explanation of integrated curriculum methodology and content will be revealed, including an explanation as well as specific examples of how classes are linked together.

Keywords: integration, curriculum, language education

The great increase in the volume of information available to students in the 21st century represents an imposing and compelling challenge to educational institutions and educators. It is essential that learners are not only trained to possess the ability to search out and find critical information, but that they are also educated how to critically assess this information. This helps to ensure that students are able to understand deeper meaning and the interrelatedness of issues and events in the present global era.

An integrated curriculum represents a student-centered approach to

learning that has been shown to motivate students and encourage higher-order thinking skills, cooperative learning, and in recent years, often includes lessons that address significant social issues and student concerns (Vars, 2001). Thus, a well-organized integrated curriculum can help address the needs of educators and students in the 21st century.

As is the case with many philosophies and methods of education, there are several definitions of an “integrated curriculum”. Beane (1997) states that an integrated curriculum involves “enhancing possibilities for personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject-area lines” (55). Shriner, Schlee and Libler (2010) explain that an integrated curriculum encourages students to apply skills, knowledge and vocabulary from more than one subject to learn about a certain topic. Finally, Malik and Malik (2011) define an integrated curriculum as the organization of teaching materials and content to bring subjects together that are usually taught and explored separately.

While all of these definitions go far in capturing the essential elements of an integrated curriculum in a general sense, they do not capture all the elements present in the current study. The integration discussed in this paper is a thoroughly-integrated language curriculum in a Japanese university English department. As will be described in more detail below, the curriculum has been integrated horizontally (between classes), but also vertically (year-to-year) not only within the broader curriculum, but also within individual courses. To this end, this paper will adopt Townsend’s (2018) definition of integration in the language classroom “as the joining of different classes, EFL and/or content, with common goals and related content, so that language learning is more structured and efficient” (170).

The Significance and Importance of an Integrated Curriculum

As briefly mentioned above, although technological advancement and rapid globalization in the 21st century represent an increasingly expanding challenge to educators, the concept of an integrated curriculum is by no means new. In fact, the Greeks were among the first to develop the concept of a holistic curriculum commonly referred to as a “model education”. For the Greeks, this was formulated around the concept of an “all-around education” that became

the basis of most education systems throughout Europe (Magee, 2001, 38). This model represents a philosophy of education that integrated knowledge included in the classic disciplines, namely music, the arts, science and literature. Knowledge from these disciplines was seen as part of a holistic approach to learning that developed well-rounded learners, which in turn gave rise to a synergetic pedagogical effect.

In more modern times, the development of curriculum integration can be traced back to the progressive education movement of the early 1900s, for example in the work of Dewey and Kilpatrick (Fraser, 2013, 19). In particular, Dewey (1938) emphasized that education must be relevant to student needs and also stimulate their prior knowledge and experiences to help young people more broadly understand the world they live in as well as the influences of the past. Along with the interdisciplinary nature of an integrated curriculum, this more student-centered, practical, and task-based approach has become a common feature of a majority of contemporary integrated curricula.

It is important to note that more traditional pedagogical methods, especially at colleges and universities, involve educators who are experts in their particular field teaching about distinct disciplines with little or no overall cohesion or cooperation. This is not necessarily detrimental to education, and if carried out professionally, can help students to become experts in a particular field. However, as will be explained below, a more holistic, comprehensive and interdependent curriculum can result in many benefits for students. It can be argued that this is especially true in regard to language learning.

As briefly mentioned above, an integrated curriculum can result in many benefits for students. Several researchers have found evidence that students who are educated at schools that emphasize integrated programs perform better on national and state examinations than their counterparts in more traditional programs (Anfara and Lipka, 2003; Bolak, K., Bialach, D., & Dunphy, M., 2005; Campbell, C., and Henning, M., 2010; Drake and Burns, 2004; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, and Flowers, 1997; Mertens and Flowers, 2003; Nolan and McKinnon, 2003; Ross and Hogaboam-Gray, 1998).

At the college level, Campbell and Henning (2010) conducted research in which they compared a traditionally taught subject course and an integrated course. Fifty-nine undergraduate students (thirty-three in the integrated course and twenty-six in the traditional course) were assessed, and it was found that

the students who completed the integrated course scored higher than their peers.

The benefits of an integrated curriculum go well beyond improved test scores, however. Vars (2001) explains that through an integrated curriculum, students gain more self-confidence and self-efficacy, become more motivated to learn, more committed to the democratic process, become more empathetic, and finally, improve their critical thinking skills. Sill (2001) has stated that creativity and critical and higher order thinking are also benefits of curriculum integration.

Fullan (2013) explains that an integrated curriculum can support “deep learning”, which means a shift from superficial learning to covering content in a student-centered environment in which they gain a deeper, richer and more well-rounded understanding of a particular issue or topic. To summarize, “when a curriculum is truly integrated, the boundaries of all academic disciplines can be merged and integrated into a dynamic and holistic pattern for successful learning and academic achievement and success” (Watkins and Kritsonis, 2011, 12).

When looking more specifically at the language classroom, Oxford (2001) makes the case that an integrated approach more closely resembles the way language skills are used in normal communication. She suggests that the segregated-skill approach common in many traditional language classrooms – teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing as distinct skills in isolation – is detrimental in that it “restrict(s) language learning to a very narrow, noncommunicative range that does not prepare students to use the language in everyday life” (3). Therefore, she argues that integration is beneficial to language learners because it “exposes ESL/EFL learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturalistically in the language” (21). As a result, students will come to understand that English is “not merely a key to passing an examination; instead, English becomes a real means of interaction and sharing among people” (21). Thus, an integrated language curriculum can be particularly beneficial to language learners.

Integrative Methodology

When considering where to begin, Malik and Malik (2011) provide some useful steps to act as a guide in the planning and implementation of an

integrated curriculum. They are as follows: train staff members, decide on the scope of integration, choose the level of integration, plan for both vertical and horizontal integration, establish working groups and elucidate responsibilities. They also suggest that educators determine learning outcomes, identify curriculum content, create themes, prepare a comprehensive timeline, select assessment methods, communicate with students and staff and commit to reevaluation and revision.

Drake and Reid (2018) propose several ways to form an integrated curriculum. The first concept is that of fusion. This represents integrating concepts such as character education, financial and critical literacy, and awareness of environmental issues into subject-based curriculum; for example, in required history courses. Another concept is a multidisciplinary curriculum that features and focuses on a similar theme or universal capability in different subjects. For example, the theme of immigration and identity could be examined and explored in subjects such as history, literature, geography and mathematics.

The next concept Drake and Reid present is the development of an interdisciplinary curriculum. This involves the integration of skills such as effective communication or critical thinking by teaching them across traditional subjects. For instance, critical thinking skills could be applied to the creation of a volunteer program that addresses a local issue such as pollution or political injustice. This program could be contemplated, planned and formed concurrently in several different subjects. In this method or model, the borderlines dividing traditional subjects become more blurred.

Finally, there is the development of a transdisciplinary curriculum. As the name implies, this type of curriculum transcends traditional fixed subjects, and is organized around a provocative issue, problem or question. Subjects are holistically blended around a particular issue or question, preferably chosen by the students themselves. For example, students could carry out an in-depth analysis of how socio-economic or ethnic groups are represented or underrepresented in various societies. As Drake and Reid have explained, there are several ways to integrate a curriculum, including several levels of commitment to the concept of a truly integrated curriculum.

While all of these concepts are important to keep in mind when developing an integrated curriculum, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) offer an

effective method of designing an integrated curriculum which they refer to as “backward design”. The Department of Practical English at Shujitsu University took a similar approach when revising its curriculum, which will be detailed below. The first step in this process is for course designers to determine overall curriculum goals and skills. Next, generalized but unified methods of student assessment are developed, to help ensure that students actually achieve the desired goals and have become sufficiently competent in the requisite skills defined by educators. The third step entails planning the instructional content and classroom and school-wide activities that are deemed essential for students to achieve course goals and skills.

At the Department of Practical English at Shujitsu University, course designers began by conducting a multi-faceted needs assessment, which included student surveys, to determine what students hoped to achieve through their studies. These surveys included all levels of university students in the department as well as individual class surveys. Furthermore, through numerous meetings, input was gathered from all teachers in the Department of Practical English to determine what they felt students needed to be successful language learners as well as how best to help students realize these goals.

As a result of this process, the overall curriculum goals were determined, and the skills necessary to achieve these goals were identified. For example, it was decided that students would be expected to conduct independent research, develop critical thinking skills as well as effective communication skills. Moreover, it was decided that students should be able to carry out effective conversations, discussions and presentations in the target language. They would also be expected to develop intercultural competence and problem-solving skills.

Following this, course designers then developed course-specific content that not only unified curriculum for the same type of course, but also included interdisciplinary content and activities. Finally, class and/or task-specific assessment rubrics and other integrated forms of assessment were created for specific courses and skill sets that would be used to determine if course goals were satisfactorily achieved.

Finally, course designers made great efforts to implement both horizontal and vertical forms of integration. Although there are many ways to integrate a curriculum, horizontal and vertical forms of integration are perhaps the most

common. As was touched upon earlier, vertical integration involves a coordinated, integrated curriculum that is established to meet pedagogical goals throughout the time students study at a particular educational institution. Moreover, skills and/or content introduced in one year are revisited the following year, and expanded upon.

A good practical example of vertical integration is the Shujitsu University Department of Practical English writing course. In order to graduate, students are required to complete an 8,000-word graduation thesis, often written in English, in their fourth year. This is a daunting task for many students, some of whom have never experienced writing much of anything in English prior to entering university. To make this process more manageable, the course designers created a writing program from the first year that gradually introduces the research, analytical, writing and critical thinking skills required to successfully create a cohesive graduation thesis about a student-chosen topic or issue (see Appendix A).

In their first year, students are introduced to the basic concepts of process writing through which they learn to create a mind map, an outline as well as how to write increasingly challenging drafts of their paper. They are also introduced to the concept of peer-editing, whereby classmates help each other improve the cohesiveness and overall quality of their papers. In this first year, the length of papers is limited to approximately 400 to 800 words. In subsequent years, the word count of papers is increased. Furthermore, additional and more demanding skills are introduced. These include the introduction of in-text citations, referencing as well as quotations. Students are also expected to conduct more and more intensive research as well as produce more in-depth academic writing. As a result, when the students are tasked with writing their graduation dissertation in their fourth and final year, they have the necessary skills and ability to complete such a demanding undertaking.

In addition to vertical integration, forms of horizontal integration were also designed and implemented by course designers at the Shujitsu University Department of Practical English. This involves dealing with certain themes in a multifaceted manner, using educational materials and student work across several courses. This supports the acquisition and reinforcement of specific goals and skill sets. As an example, in a first-year research skills class, students gather information from the Internet and fill out worksheets. Once complete,

these worksheets are then passed to their writing teacher and are used by students to complete an academic essay. Finally, students practice giving a presentation about their chosen topic in their oral communication class culminating in a formal presentation in their Internet English class (see Appendix B).

Through the above process, vocabulary, knowledge, achievement goals and specific skills are recycled and reinforced across the curriculum. While students progress from conducting research on a topic, to writing an academic paper, to preparing, practicing and performing a presentation, the cognitive load is reduced by allowing them to work within a particular range of vocabulary that is important to them and pertinent to the task. Imagine having to do all that while at each step one is presented with a completely new concept or theme replete with all the associated new vocabulary?

Finally, regarding language education, aspects of a “mirrored” or bilingual/biliterate curriculum can also be employed. For example, a curriculum can be mirrored in the students’ first language and in the specific target language. As a concrete example, in the Department of Practical English at Shujitsu University the actual or literal meaning of the American Declaration of Independence is explored and taught in one class, and then the philosophical antecedents and the social, political and economic elements that existed at the time that influenced the creation of the Declaration are explored and conveyed in another class.

Conclusion

Of course, fundamentally reforming a curriculum is a huge undertaking. However, integrating some aspects of a curriculum can be relatively simple. For example, a first-year writing teacher could talk with a colleague who teaches second-year students to determine if there is any way to better prepare students for the rigors that await them. As well, if colleagues teach classes focusing on different skills, they could try to coordinate content so that students can focus on developing the required skills to the greatest extent possible. Also, communication should take place so that colleagues come to see that the skills are interrelated, and should not be seen as isolated. Another positive effect of this process is that students can see firsthand that teachers are collaborating with each other to improve their educational experience.

This was essentially how integration was initially approached in the Department of Practical English at Shujitsu University. Over time, however, interest increased amongst even those teachers who were initially skeptical. One of the concerns among some teachers was over a perceived infringement that integration might have on their academic freedom. They did not want any restrictions placed on either how or what they taught. This grassroots approach, however, effectively demonstrated that while some standardization was required to collaborate, it still allowed teachers to teach the skills and content as they felt best suited their teaching strengths and their students' needs.

Eventually, it was decided that the entire curriculum should be reformed. With acceptance from department faculty members, integration became possible on a greater scale. While employing the "backward design" process reminiscent of Wiggins and McTighe (2005), a curriculum was developed that is thoroughly integrated across the vertical, horizontal and mirrored spectrums. It is felt that this approach has benefitted the students greatly, and has aided in helping them achieve their language goals as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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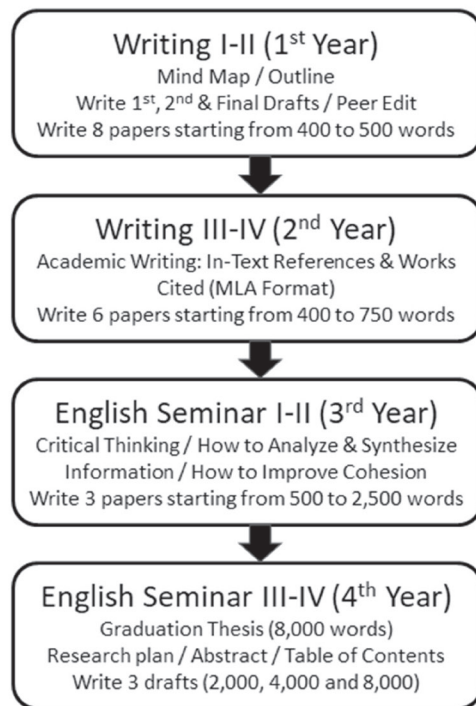
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Appendix A

Vertical Integration



Appendix B

Horizontal Integration

