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Are we there yet? Communicative Language Instruction at Muroran Institute of Technology in 2018

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Abstract

In a 2011 paper written about the English curriculum at Muroran Institute of Technology, it was noted that the curriculum had “gone through many changes” as should any curriculum that exists in the ever-changing world in which we live. This paper looks at two areas that have evolved greatly here at Muroran since then – Virtual Exchange (VE) and the use of a Learning Management System (LMS). The paper notes that VE continues to develop and progress throughout the curriculum and posits some reasons why it hasn’t gone curriculum-wide. Even so, it will show that VE should be considered as an important part of any communicative English language and that use of an LMS can assist teachers too.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), task-based learning, Virtual Exchange, Intercultural empathy

1 Then and now

1.1 Introduction

Muroran Institute of Technology’s (MuroIT) English language program has continued to develop, trying to ensure that students’ needs are met so that, after graduating, they have a firm grounding in English when they enter their future employment. For many this means having a respectable TOEIC score. For others it means having a broader knowledge of where and why English is spoken in the world and for others still it means being able to communicate orally in English. In an ideal world all of these would be accomplished and more. The reality is, university English educators have a limited amount of time and are sometimes pushed to ensure one goal is achieved often at the expense of others.

Since 2011 there has been a lot of pressure on universities throughout Japan, not just MuroIT, for them to improve their students’ TOEIC scores. This has led some universities to move the focus of their English teachers toward TOEIC test preparation. Fortunately, MuroIT has maintained its “two-pillar” approach where students have classes focused on TOEIC but also have a more rounded education in English that includes communication in English.

In the 2011 paper on the English curriculum at MuroIT, Gaynor (2011) outlined his idea of what Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) entailed. His outline was detailed and precise and it would be remiss not to cover the main points he outlined here again. He noted that CLT “is based on the theory that the primary function of language use is communication” and that “its goal is to make use of real-life situations that necessitate communication.” The core tenets of CLT that he included from Berns (1990, in Gaynor, 2011) are also imperative to any CLT based curriculum. His final

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suggested addition by Wesche & Skehan (2002, p. 208), to “use ... authentic (non-pedagogic) texts and communication activities linked to “real-world” contexts, often emphasizing links across written and spoken modes and channels” is also prescient with regards to CLT at MuroIT.

CLT as a style of language teaching very much also ties into the policies of MuroIT, where the fostering and acquisition of communicative ability are promoted, in addition to the cultivation of a deep humanism amongst its students, as outlined in both its diploma and curriculum policies⁽¹⁾. These policies have also been influenced by the requests of employers. Recent surveys carried out by Keidanren⁽²⁾ (the Japan business federation) continue to note that companies seek students with communicative competence in both their mother tongue and in English. They also want to employ students who have had experience interacting with students from a variety of different cultures, meaning they appreciate the importance of intercultural understanding. Indeed, intercultural understanding is in the top 15 most desirable traits for students from both science and arts backgrounds and is ranked as being even more desirable than foreign language ability in that survey.

1.2 Tasks, motivation, e-learning, CEFR - then

In 2011 the native English-speaking faculty at MuroIT were focusing on issues that were integral to CLT. Those issues, unsurprisingly, are still essential to CLT in 2018. A recap of how these issues were covered then is important if one is to compare them to how they are being covered now.

Gaynor (2011), in acknowledging the importance of tasks in language learning, points to Doughty and Long (2003) who remind us that, “new knowledge is better integrated into long-term memory, and easier retrieved, if tied to real-world events and activities” (p. 58). Gaynor goes on to espouse the use of authentic materials as they contain authentic language and reflect real-world language use (Richards, 2001).

The use of real-world tasks continues to be of import at MuroIT though the definition of “real-world” may be different for different people. Some may believe that asking students to describe, in a foreign language, how to use a new product is a “real-world” task. However, the vast majority of products sold now come with instructions in numerous languages and it may, in fact, be rare that someone would have to verbally give instructions on how to use a new product. Is that task really “real-world” then? Some may say “perhaps not”.

In the same paper, Johnson (2011) proposed a study on the motivational effect of instructional materials and the results of that study were published in different journals. It is not particularly surprising that materials will affect students’ motivation and being able to supply quality learning materials is obviously very important. Johnson’s quality research into motivating factors for engineering students has led to the creation of excellent materials for many of the students at MuroIT but materials are not the only thing that are important for motivating students in an EFL classroom. Johnson’s previous work (2009) noted a number of studies showing students’ motivation to learn English increased the most when they had the opportunity to interact with foreigners. What has become clear is there is a myriad of factors that influence the motivation of students and these need to be considered when preparing and teaching.

In the section of the 2011 paper written by the author, numerous online tools were introduced and methods for incorporating them into CLT contexts were outlined. Two in particular are still having profound effects on language learners at MuroIT. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), which is often called Virtual Exchange (VE) nowadays, was being piloted in 2010. The use of a Learning Management System (LMS) was also outlined in the paper with the many benefits of the Moodle system being outlined. Both of these have gone on to impact not just the language learning curriculum but also how classes are taught in other departments in the university. Moodle has become a mainstay for many classes throughout MuroIT.

The final author, Graves, of the 2011 paper has since moved on from MuroIT but her input regarding the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was detailed. The CEFR has become the main method of describing language attainment and become the basis for foreign language curriculum development in most countries around the world for both EFL and other languages. The German and Chinese programs at MuroIT are now using the CEFR as part of their curriculum development. Indeed, many universities throughout Japan are doing likewise and Japan is in the process of developing a Japan specific framework. The CEFR did not have a major effect on the English curriculum at MuroIT in 2011 but it continues to affect English curriculum design around the world.

2. Virtual Exchange and what students want at MuroIT

2.1 Virtual Exchange

In the 2011 paper Hagley referred to CMC as, at that time, it was the term most commonly used to describe exchanges between students that were either online or, in some other way communicating but, mediated by computers. Since then, a number of international and national government initiatives have been carried out to promote international communication using the power of the Internet. Both the United States government and the European Union refer to such exchanges as Virtual Exchanges (VE) and that term has come to be used to refer to online intercultural exchanges and other CMC. The history thereof, and much more, was outlined by O'Dowd and Lewis (2016). Their book, and the chapters therein, outline in great detail how VE has become an essential part of education, not just foreign language education, around the world. With regard to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Japan, there is also extensive literature on the positive effects of VE (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Hagley, 2016). The benefits also extend to intercultural competence (Byram, 1997) as noted by O'Dowd and Lewis (ibid) and Wang et. al (2017). The benefits are many and it is for this reason that the author has been carrying out VE at MuroIT for the past eight years. A more detailed outline of the exchange can be seen in Hagley (2016) but the basic idea is that students use the language they are studying in class to interact with students from other countries. Simple discussion topics are used so that the students can gain confidence using their limited language abilities to find out about the lives of students in other countries. Text, audio and video are exchanged between students via a Moodle forum. The exchange begins at the start of each semester and continues for eight weeks with four different topics being covered in addition to having an open forum. The exchange expanded to become the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject) that has had some 15,000 students from 14 countries participate over the last four years, with 35 universities from around Japan also participating.

2.2 MuroIT students' views of English – what do they want?

In the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018, the author carried out a simple survey to try and gauge student interest in the content of their English communication classes. The author was worried that perhaps students were not that interested in communicating with foreigners as part of their English program, but would rather use that time to communicate about their majors or use content related to their majors. A survey of students who had not participated in any virtual exchanges was carried out with the results being outlined below. In the columns, answers to the statements are based on the following: 1 is “strongly think so”; 2 “basically think so”; 3 “basically think not so” and 4 “strongly think not so”. The results can be compared, as the same survey was carried out with students who had participated in the IVEProject.

2017 Fall (not participated in VE) n=84 all second-year students studying in the Electronics/IT or Applied Science departments

	1	2	3	4
If I have to study English, I'd prefer to study English related to engineering over communicating with foreigners.	16 19%	22 26%	41 49%	5 6%
In the future I will use English related to my major.	16 19%	46 55%	19 23%	3 4%
In the future, I think I will communicate with foreigners in my work place.	15 18%	35 42%	27 32%	7 8%
I want to talk about my major in English.	23 27%	31 37%	19 23%	11 13%
Online international exchange has more value than studying English related to my major.	17 20%	32 38%	30 36%	5 6%

2017 Fall (had participated in VE) n=40 all second-year students studying mechanical engineering

	1	2	3	4
If I have to study English, I'd prefer to study English related to engineering over communicating with foreigners.	4 10%	6 15%	22 55%	8 20%
In the future I will use English related to my major.	9 23%	26 65%	5 13%	0
In the future, I think I will communicate with foreigners in my work place.	13 33%	19 48%	7 18%	1 3%
I want to talk about my major in English.	9 23%	18 45%	11 28%	2 5%
Online international exchange has more value than studying English related to my major.	10 25%	22 55%	8 20%	0

2018 Spring (not participated in VE) n=178 all first-year students from a variety of departments

	1	2	3	4
If I have to study English, I'd prefer to study English related to engineering over communicating with foreigners.	31 17%	52 29%	70 39%	25 14%
In the future I will use English related to my major.	51 29%	84 47%	33 19%	10 6%
In the future, I think I will communicate with foreigners in my work place.	56 31%	68 38%	43 24%	11 6%
I want to talk about my major in English.	41 23%	64 36%	55 31%	18 10%
Online international exchange has more value than studying English related to my major.	53 30%	73 41%	44 25%	8 4%

2018 Spring (had participated in VE) n=43 all second-year students studying material science

	1	2	3	4
If I have to study English, I'd prefer to study English related to engineering over communicating with foreigners.	10 23%	9 21%	20 47%	4 9%
In the future I will use English related to my major.	9 21%	17 40%	11 26%	6 14%
In the future, I think I will communicate with foreigners in my work place.	4 9%	21 49%	15 35%	3 7%
I want to talk about my major in English.	5 12%	12 28%	15 35%	11 26%
Online international exchange has more value than studying English related to my major.	6 14%	18 42%	18 42%	1 2%

The survey's design is, admittedly, not particularly robust but the results go a long way toward assuaging the author's worries. The results from these surveys strongly suggest that students, whether they had or had not participated in the IVEProject, place more value in online international exchange and would prefer to communicate with foreigners rather than study English related to engineering. Students understand that they may well have to use English in their workplace in the future but to do so, they will need more basic communication skills and the ability to interact with foreigners. They do want to talk about their majors in English, but they want to communicate with foreigners even more so. This is particularly evident for students studying in the mechanical engineering department, who participated in the project, but also very clear amongst the other departments too.

2.3 CLT at MuroIT - now

If teachers of EFL, when developing their curriculum, are able to create real-life situations that necessitate communication, activities that use communication with “real-world” contexts, where “more than one variety of a language is recognized as a viable model for learning and teaching, and culture is recognized as instrumental in shaping speakers’ communicative competence” (Berns, 1990, in Gaynor, 2011), then they are setting up a true CLT curriculum. In traditional EFL classroom settings prior to VE, this was almost impossible to do. However, with the advent of VE it is now easy to organize real-world communicative activities that incorporate intercultural development.

The IVEProject, sponsored by a Japanese Kaken grant and thus free of charge for students in recognized tertiary education classes, is one way of ensuring that students can truly feel they are in a CLT environment. Almost half the English communication classes at MuroIT are now incorporating the IVEProject into their syllabi. Feedback from students participating in this project is positive. Hagley and Thomson (2017) noted that 85% of Japanese students participating in previous iterations of the exchange believed it was beneficial to learning English with 81% of them wanting to exchange information, via the site, with students in other countries and 73% stating they learned a lot about their partner countries. Hagley (forthcoming) also notes that, through participation in the IVEProject, even students with low levels of English can improve their interactional confidence and intercultural sensitivity whilst also developing a better understanding of both their own and other cultures. Incorporating the IVEProject, or other such VE, into EFL communication classes would therefore seem an excellent option for teachers with a firm belief in CLT methods.

3. The Learning Management System at MuroIT

Another area that has developed greatly over the past eight years, for the author and many other faculty at MuroIT, is the use of the LMS - Moodle. Each semester for the last eight years, the author has asked the question of students “Would you prefer to use a textbook or the LMS”. In every semester the answer has been 70% or higher for “Prefer to use the LMS”. The same result was achieved for the question “Do you believe the LMS is a good learning system” with 70% or more consistently saying “yes”. LMS have a number of benefits that textbooks can’t supply. Students can access a variety of material such as audio, video, text, interactive quizzes and also interact with others in different countries using mobile devices anywhere that they have an internet connection. With the new Moodle app, they can do most of this offline as well.

For the teacher, there are benefits too with the ability to see what students are doing and when. With this information, they can offer better support for students that are struggling and try to motivate those that aren’t interacting with the material. The many reports that are included with Moodle also allow teachers to easily analyze the quiz questions they create for facility index and discriminative efficiency ensuring they can be made more effective. There are numerous other reports that allow teachers to follow their students’ learning in a number of different ways. This ability to offer students access to a variety of authentic materials, to be able to challenge them with effective quiz questions and allow them to interact with others from around the world makes the use of an LMS in EFL teaching very constructive.

4. Conclusion

MuroIT’s English program has continued to undergo many changes over the last eight years, as has EFL teaching around the world. Students are gaining benefits from these changes that students from ten years ago weren’t able to receive. Easier access to materials, the ability to interact with students around the world and more individualized learning are just some of the advantages that have been covered in this paper and that are now available to students at MuroIT. To offer students these requires the teacher to understand how to use the LMS effectively and how to create materials for the platform. Ensuring access to the VE that is available is also important. It is imperative that schools include training for teachers on an ongoing basis so that they are able to do these things. As employers are asking for students to be competent in intercultural communication in addition to having foreign language skills, as outlined above, it is now important that teachers can offer their students these opportunities. In addition, students are voicing their desire to interact with students

in foreign countries, possibly because they know what their future employers are asking for in their recruits. To assist their students, the English department at MuroIT is thus moving in the right direction.

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