

A Case Study on Learner Motivation and Studying English for Specific Purposes

ROSS, Matthew

Faculty of Education, Kokusai Gakuin Saitama College

Abstract

In this case study, students at a Junior college were introduced to an English curriculum that incorporated English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) elements to better prepare them for their respective fields. During this time, their views on the usefulness of English in their professional and personal lives, as well as their motivation to continue studying field-specific English versus General English (GE) were evaluated.

The class curriculum consisted of 15 90-minute classes that were broken down into 60 minutes of GE and 30 minutes of EOP. A variety of assessment methods were used throughout with the GE section of class accounting for 60% of their grade and the EOP section accounting for 25%. The remainder of their grade was for attendance and participation.

At three points during the semester, in the beginning, just after the midterm, and just before the final exam, the students were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The survey asked about their outlook on using English in the future and their preference between GE and EOP.

While participation varied for each survey, the classes proceeded together. The results show that the EOP curriculum did not appear to affect students' motivation to study English and that many students' valuation of the English Language was unaffected by their experiences with EOP.

These findings show that students did not feel more motivated to study English when the contents were designed to focus on their professional life, suggesting that their perception of English is more oriented on daily life tasks than their professional lives.

Keywords English for Occupational Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, Learner Motivation

1. Introduction

This study will follow college students at a private junior college as an English for Specific Purposes course over one semester. The study will investigate the ramifications of a curriculum with ESP elements on student motivations to study and if their opinions on using English in the workplace changes over time.

A Review of relevant literature

Learner Motivation

There is a wealth of information on the topic of learner motivation. While every country and every learner has a fine level of nuance in their educational needs and goals, Japan has been a particular area of interest for many researchers. Learner motivation can vary greatly depending on many factors including gender and age (Kimura et al., 2001).

While the standard extrinsic method of motivation i.e. homework and testing for the attainment of grades will remain in place, one of the goals of the study will be to see if an EOP curriculum can foster any intrinsic motivation (Deci, 2012, 23)

The goal of this study will be to see if and how student's perception of English correlates to their future work life, and whether or not their motivation to learn English changes with a student-centered EOP curriculum.

English for Occupational Purposes

As the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown, so too have the ever more specific labels for it. Following the recommendations of Laurence (Anthony, 2018) it was determined that the label English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) best fit the materials in the class. Therefore, the Early Childhood Education students were asked to complete tasks tailored to their future workplace goals while the Nutrition and Culinary students received tasks of their own.

Task-based learning

In order to execute this curriculum, it was decided that a task-based curriculum (TBC) be employed. (Willis & Willis, 1996) The student-centered nature of TBC provides the freedom through research and practice that students will need to discover the language they need that will be contextually appropriate for their respective workplaces.

Participants

The participants in the study are 163 1st-year students at a private Junior college just outside Tokyo. They are primarily between the ages of 18 and 19, however, some of the students are part of a "reskilling" program offered by the government for workers who wish to change their career path and are therefore older (mid-30s to late 40s.)

There are two schools within the college, Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Nutrition (NUT). The school of nutrition offers two programs, one is a nutritionist degree and the other is a culinary degree. In the ECE program, the students are divided into two classes of 38 and 42 students each. The nutritionist classes are similarly divided with 34 in one class and 34 in the other. The culinary program has just 15 students in the first year, but as it is in the same school, it is labeled as such. Therefore, the EOP portion of their class will be divided between those centered on nutrition and those centered on culinary tasks.

2. Methodology

The research takes place over the course of a 15-week term. The students have one 90-minute class that meets once a week. Each week, the class is divided into either 45 to 60 minutes of General English (Anthony, 2018) GE followed by 30 minutes of EOP.

For the GE portion of the class (Hickling, 2023) was used. This textbook was chosen for its ratio of English to Japanese and thematic-based structure, along with its remedial level which would appeal to the broadest set of learners in the class.

The ESP portion of the class was developed by the teacher to reflect the specific community of practice (Smith, 2003) that the students were expected to join upon graduating. Vocabulary and grammatical requirements were left intentionally broad to facilitate the production of novel language and allow students of various levels to participate and advance at their own speed.

At three intervals, the beginning of the semester, just after midterms, and the final day of class, students were given a survey. (See Appendix 1a) This survey assessed their general regard for studying English in a classroom context, their opinions regarding the role English would play in their personal and professional lives, and their motivation to continue studying.

General English (GE) portion

During the GE portion of the class, students typically listened to the included audio supplement from the textbook. Each unit typically took 2 days to complete. The first day would begin with basic vocabulary translation. Then, a listening passage would be played twice. The students would be asked to order a four-panel comic displaying images from the passage. Then, they would be asked to answer 3 true and false questions. Lastly, there would be a cloze exercise with six gaps in the passage. After listening to and completing each exercise, students would be selected at random, or called up to the board to give the answers.

The second day would begin with two short dialogue exercises, during which the students would select one of 2 options from a bracketed portion of a sentence. Next, there would be a passage with a cloze exercise centered on a cultural point of interest. After that would be another true and false section. Then, the students would be asked to list groups of typically relevant items before filling in a dialogue of their own using the information they'd written down.

On both days, the material would be book-ended with extension exercises that consisted first of a warm-up created by the teacher that supplemented the content of the book followed by a practice section that likewise consisted of pairwork in which students would take turns creating sentences, then asking questions and answering them using the sentences.

Assessments were performed via two homework assignments, two quizzes, and a midterm. The quizzes consisted of paper tests that covered materials from the book. Homework one and two were essay assignments based on thematic topics from the textbook.

EOP portion

Following the GE portion of the class, the teacher would announce to the students that they were finished with the “textbook” portion for the day. Then, the students would begin a three-week cycle of introduction and research, teacher guidance and practice, and finally presentation.

The first day of the cycle would begin with the teacher introducing the theme for that cycle, which typically took about ten minutes. Students would be asked to prepare a presentation complete with a script following a few guidelines. (See Appendix 2) They would be given around 20 minutes to freely research the topic in class and ask questions. During this time, the teacher would move about the room and offer advice or tentative corrections.

The second day was considered practice. Students would first receive a short review lecture of around 5 minutes where they would be asked what they remember from the introduction portion of the previous class. Then, they would be given the remainder of the class to finish researching, write their script, have it checked for grammatical errors, and practice. Due to the size of the classes and the amount of information in each script, students were encouraged to bring their script to the teacher outside class so that it could be checked.

The third and final day in the cycle was the presentation phase. During this time, the teacher would distribute a score sheet for the students. The students would write their names on the score sheets. Then, when it was their turn, they would return the score sheet, deliver their presentation, and turn in their script. Much of the score for the presentation would be marked while it was delivered with the remainder of the points being awarded after reviewing the script for any grammatical errors.

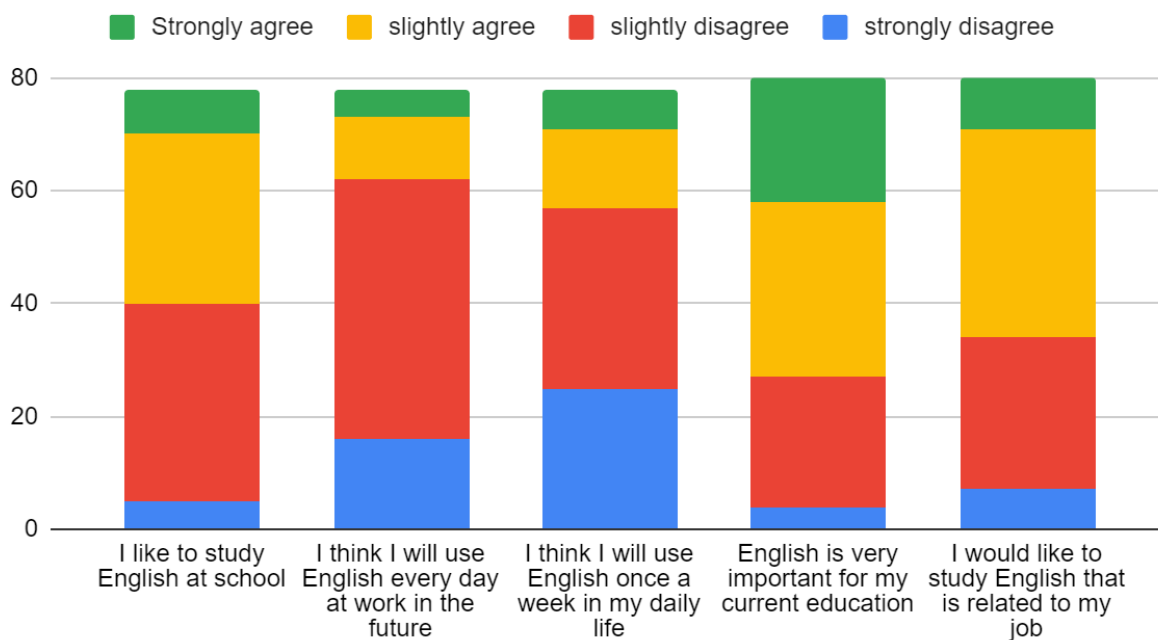
For each of the two programs, two of the presentations were group projects. On these occasions, students were asked to fill out a single score sheet and were graded together.

While the EOP portion was tailored to students respective programs, the results of the surveys were aggregated in the final results to create a broader view of attitudes across the institution.

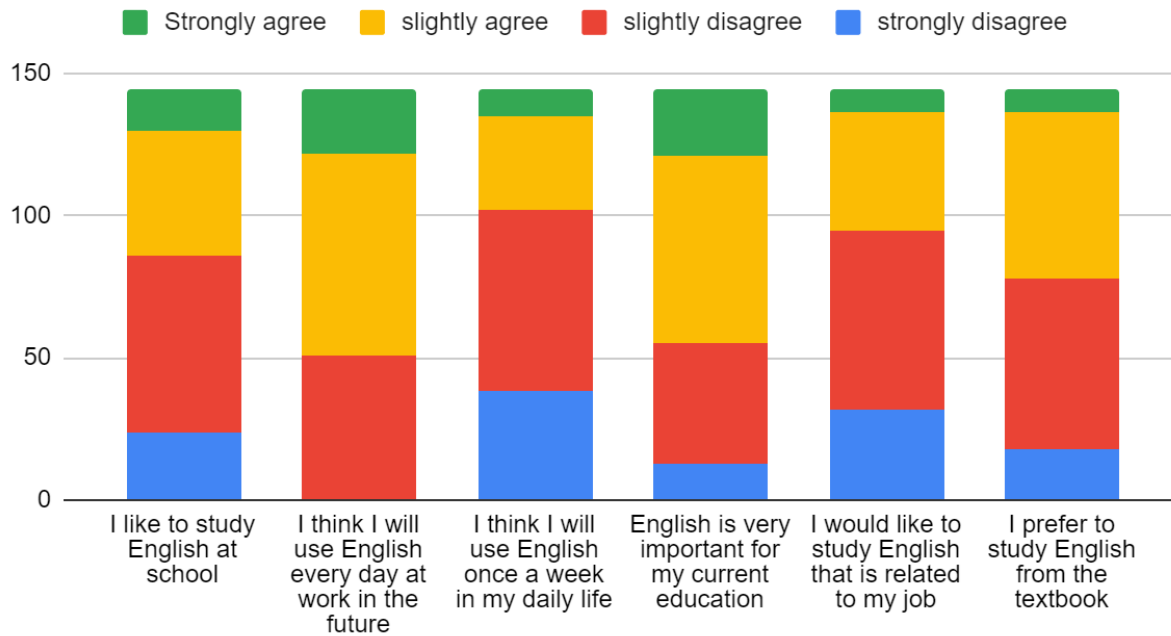
3. Results

The results are displayed below.

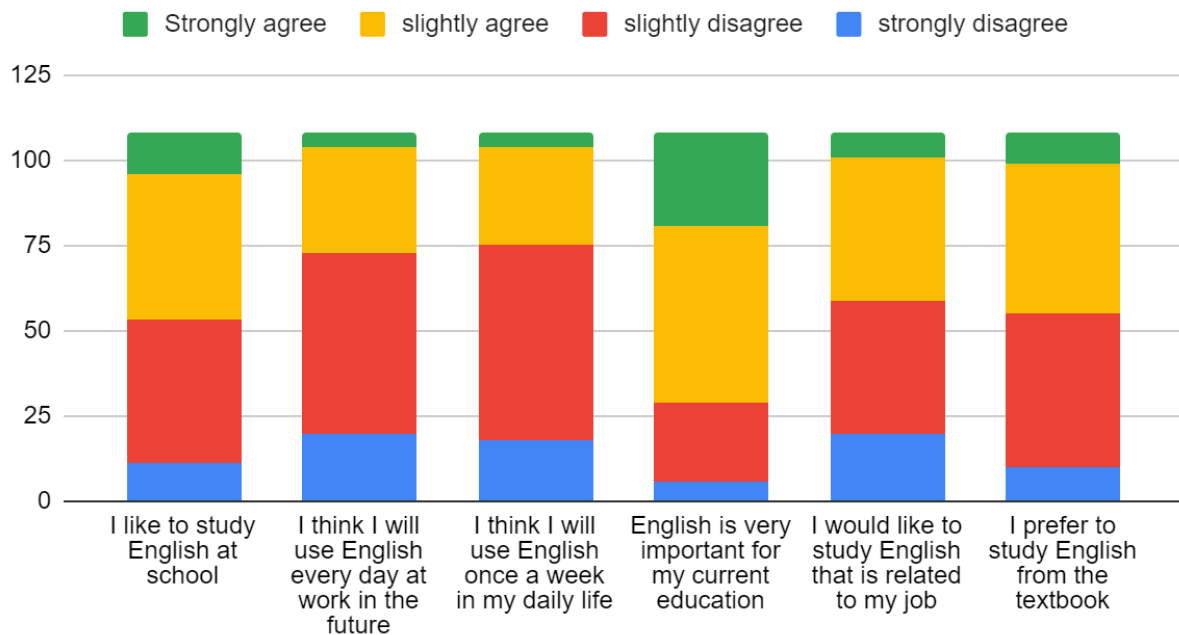
Pre-class survey



Midclass survey



Post class survey



The findings of the surveys were not out of line with initial impressions. When given a 4-point scale, student responses tended to concentrate in the center, with answers of mild agreement or disagreement. Regardless, the findings of the study were of value.

The first question, “I like to study English at school” received steady responses throughout the semester, reaching a slightly low point at midterms.

“I think I will use English every day at work in the future” saw a concentration of answers in the *slightly agree* and *slightly disagree* areas, with responses migrating both from the *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* areas. It is interesting to note that in the post-midterm survey, there were no respondents who reported *strongly agree* with this statement.

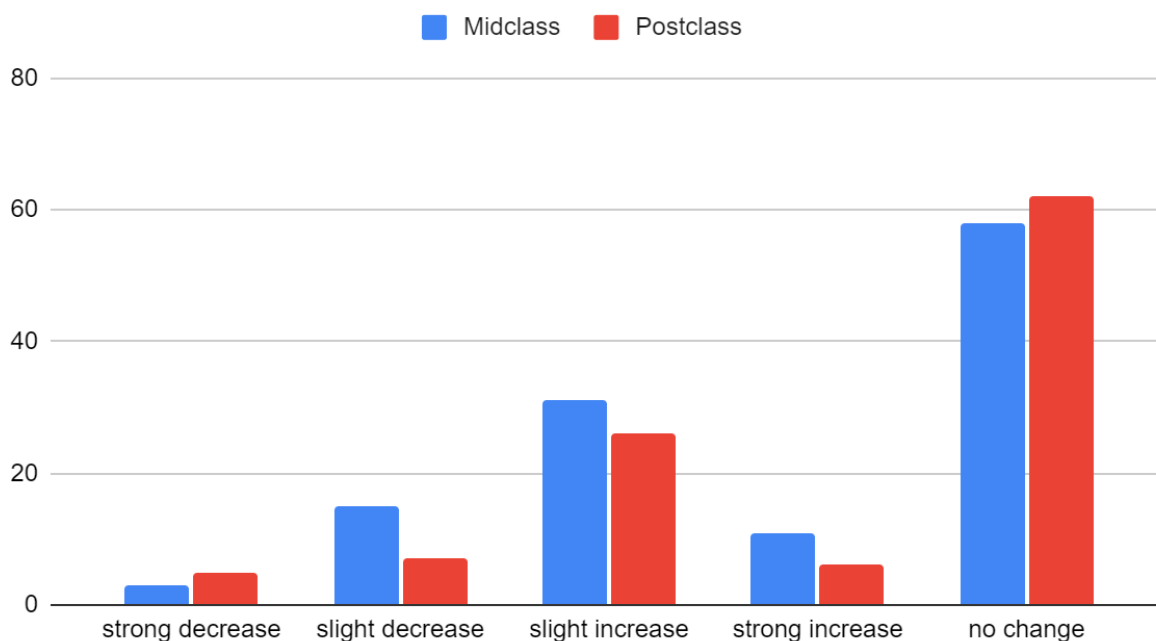
The third question “I think I will use English once a week in my daily life” had a notable shift. While the number of strongly agree responses shrank over time, there was a large change in the strongly disagree and slightly disagree areas, suggesting a migration from *strongly disagree* to *slightly disagree*. There was also an upward trend in *slightly agree* responses that cannot be explained entirely by a change from *strongly agree* to *slightly agree*.

With the next statement, “English is very important for my current education” there was a large contraction in the *strongly agree* area during the midterm survey, only for this category to return almost to its previous percentage during the final survey. There was also a steady rise in *slightly agree* responses over the term. There was also an increase in both *slightly disagree* and strongly disagree during the midterm survey that fell during the final, particularly with the former.

The statement “I would prefer to study English related to my job” saw an overall decline in agreement responses. There were large increases in both the *slightly disagree* and *strongly disagree* categories with *strongly agree* decreasing by almost half.

Lastly, the statement “My motivation to study English has changed”, which was only included in the midterm and final surveys and also had a fifth point on the scale to account for “no change” saw well over half the responses concentrated on that answer. For the remainder, there was a small decrease in both *disagree* responses and a slight increase in *agree* responses. The results are displayed below.

Midclass and Postclass



4. Implications

While the study was started with the hope that there would be overall increases and decreases in certain responses across all the questions, this was not the case. However, the results are still telling.

Notably, the shift in responses regarding the use of English in the workplace suggests that as the students studied their EOP tasks, they began to feel that the English language may have at least a modest value to their careers in the future. This reasoning would also explain the shift in responses regarding the need for English in their daily life, which saw the strongly disagree category go from 32.1% in the first survey to 16.7% in the third. This shows an overall increase in students believes that the English language will have some role in their daily lives, despite the 5.3% decrease in strongly agree responses,

Next, the overall steady response to “English is important to my education” shows that students have some awareness of the direct importance that English has on their professional lives. The increase in negative responses during the midterm may have more to do with the manner in which surveys were distributed, which will be discussed further in the limitations section.

Of all the statements, “I would prefer to study English related to my job” saw the largest overall decrease in positive responses. While there are a number of factors that might explain this, with fatigue at a novel, task-based OEP curriculum being an important one, it is concerning to see that students may not be connecting their English lessons with future professional benefits. Because of the immigration trends in Japan (Macrotrends LLC, 2023) and the increase in foreigners, many of whom speak English and many more who may use English as a medium of communication it is concerning to see this disconnect. Particularly during a time when immigrants are playing increasingly diverse roles in Japanese work and school life.

The final question concerned students' overall motivation to study English. While this might have been the steadiest statistic gathered with the “no change” category holding at around 58%. There was an increase in respondents who reported a slight increase in their motivation. A change of 21.5 to 24.5 cannot be accounted for entirely by the decrease in large increase responses.

These results taken together show that while students recognize that the English language has some importance in their lives, the introduction of a curriculum designed to meet their specific work needs didn't appear to impact their intrinsic motivation.

Given these results, it may be a good idea to adjust the curriculum in the future. One potential avenue would be to reduce the number of presentations and spend more time teaching common grammar and vocabulary as scaffolding for larger, more complex presentations. This course of action might give students more ownership over their content.

Limitations

It is important to note that the first survey was distributed at the beginning of the first day of class. The next one was distributed just after the midterm, and the final survey was distributed just *before* the final exam.

While circumstances dictated this distribution timing, it is also important to note that anxiety over testing could have an effect on students' outlook on learning English and affect their answers accordingly (Kondo & Yang, 2004, 258).

Furthermore, fluctuations in attendance and participation may have had a significant impact on the findings. Students in Junior colleges are often faced with work-life balance issues that can impact attendance. Moreover, while the instructions were read aloud and translated into Japanese, the student's English levels might have left room for misunderstanding of either the statements posed or the instructions given.

It also bears remembering that the student teacher relationship can have a great impact on studies such as these. While steps were taken to minimize the potential for a conflict of interest via the anonymization of survey results, it is possible that interpersonal relationships might have had an affect on the study, either causing students to answer positively or negatively based on teacher interactions rather than lesson content.

Another potential area for further research concerns the responses of students in their individual programs. While this study attempted to maintain a broad view of the institution, it would be advisable to study each program individually for potential differences.

Lastly, the study is limited by time. The Japanese education system is still dominated by teacher-centered lectures (Al-Gahtani, 2015, 29) with rote memorization of texts and reproductive exercises (Ghofur et al., 2017). It is possible that a new, very different curriculum in which they are assessed on speaking and writing alongside knowledge of the text caused stress for the students and affected their performance. Ultimately, more time spent with a task-based EOP will bring familiarity with the concept may yield more positive results.

5. Concluding remarks

The results of the study it is clear that there is a disconnect between student's English studies and professional goals. While students seem to enjoy English, there seems to be little professional motivation to study it. While more qualitative data is needed, this study can better inform course design and assessment practice to ensure that students are as well prepared to enter the work force vis a vis the English language as possible.

Declaration of competing interest

The author indicated no potential conflicts of interest.

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