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The first English debate class of the IGSES' Global Centre of Excellence on Novel Carbon Resources

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The conceptualisation, implementation and outcome of the first English debate course within the IGSES G-COE program on novel carbon resources are detailed. A personal assessment is also given.

Key words: *education, internationalisation, G-COE, debate class, Japan's energy policy*

1. Introduction

Within its newly established Global-COE program, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) has introduced an educational program at a number of Japanese universities aimed at internationalizing the students' curriculum.[1] The program includes multiple short and one long-term study period abroad. Last year, one such program, the Global Center of Excellence on Novel Carbon Resources, was started at the Interdisciplinary Graduate School of Engineering Sciences (IGSES) at Kyushu University.[2] This educational program can be seen as an addition to an already existing graduate and postgraduate program, so that students benefit from the G-COE while simultaneously pursuing their graduate and postgraduate work in their own original fields of specialization. Thus, the program draws students from different areas of the natural sciences and engineering with students commencing the G-COE program at the M2 (second year of a two-year masters program) or at the D1 (1st year of the 3-year doctor course) level and ending it with the graduation from the doctor course. More than 10% of the students are non-Japanese nationals.

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One of the primary aims of the Japanese Ministry to establish such a program is to give Japanese students an early opportunity to become acquainted with the international stage. Within this, a good acquisition of the English language is of fundamental importance. Thus, a number of educational components within the G-COE curriculum focus on furthering the English language proficiency, usually within the context of the general scientific topic of the individual program. In the present case of the G-COE on novel carbon resources at the IGSES (with topics such as securing future energy needs, mitigation of the environmental impact due to the use of coal, study of the energy policies of the East-Asian region, among others), one such educational component focussing on the English language aspect is the English debate class. This class was held for the first time in the fall semester of 2008/2009. In the following, the conceptualization and the implementation of this first debate class are detailed.

2. Outset

At the outset, 14 students took part in the English debate course. Of these 5 students were non-Japanese nationals and 3 students (all non-Japanese) were pursuing their actual research work on a campus different from that the debate class was to be held on. The English language level of the Japanese participants

ranged from "good" to "beginner's level". At the same time, the non-Japanese students' proficiency of the Japanese language ranged from "very good" to "beginner's level" For all non-Japanese students, English was their second language. The educational background and research interests of the students varied widely – chemistry, surface physics, and material engineering were among their fields of specialisation. For the course, one credit was to be given. Additionally, it quickly became clear that research activities, especially those linked to short-term stays abroad, could override participation in class.

3. Conceptualisation of a debate class for the global COE of IGSES

At the start, no exact structure or educational targets had been assigned to the English debate class by the Ministry granting the program or by Kyushu University when applying for the program. It quickly became clear, however, that the nominal outcome of the class would have to involve a proof of the students ability to engage in a debate in English on a topic related to the general theme of the G-COE. This would have to be achieved by students of a very heterogenous background and language proficiency within a time period of only a few weeks as only one credit was to be given for the course. In addition, the restrictions due to the different schedules of the students and the location of the students on two different campuses separated by more than 20 km had to be taken into account. Two beneficial characteristics greatly facilitated procedures: 1.) Kyushu University has a good and well-established video-link system; 2.) the group of students at one of the two locations was very homogenous as the students all belonged to the same research laboratory and shared a common educational and research background.

From the outset, it was evident that a traditional classroom setting would either result in numerous absentees due to a difficult synchronization of the students demanding and often overriding time schedules or would necessitate the creation of two or more independent classes running side-by-side. As the outcome was to be a proven ability of the students to debate in English and as a homogenous group of 3 students already existed on the second campus, it was only a small step towards the realization that a separation of the class members into groups that would finally debate each other on a given topic would fit many of the prerequisites mentioned above.

4. Implementation of the class

At the beginning, all members met twice in a traditional classroom format, albeit with a video-link between the two campuses. The students introduced each other (name, educational background, research interests), exchanged contact information and in return were given pertinent information regarding the course: in three different and independent groups, the students were to develop a speech on the topic 'what should Japans energy policy look like in 30 years time' (the topic was chosen by the instructor). The 11 students, most of whom did not know each other before, of the main campus spontaneously formed two groups, while the three students of the second campus maintained their group structure. Also, the students of each group were told to elect a group leader and a group sub-leader. The group leader and sub-leader were given the reponsibility to coordinate their group. This included the coordination of the work schedule of the group members. Also, they were asked to be the primary contact of the group with the instructor. It was also made clear that while the groups could interact with each other, at the very end, the groups would debate each other in a competitive fashion, and thus it would be up to their discretion as to how much information they would want to exchange. Although the instructor would make rooms available for meetings at the groups' request, it would be left up to the respective group whether the instructor could participate in the meetings themselves. The instructor would make himself available, if advise were needed or resources such as books or journals were requested.

5. Actual Progression of the class

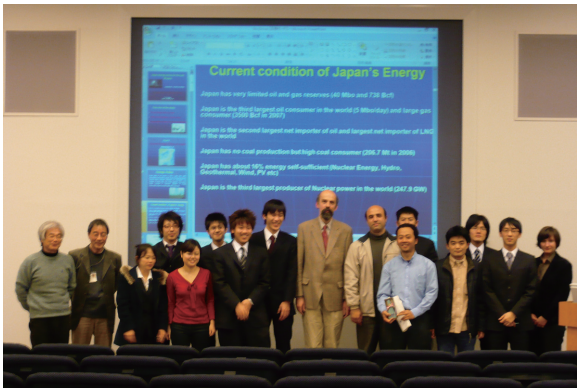
Initially, the instructor asked the group leaders of the three groups to hold a meeting within a given time span. The instructor attended the first meetings of two of the three groups. In these, all group members were present. In both groups was one non-Japanese student. In one group, with the foreign student being fluent in Japanese, the discussions were held mostly in Japanese. In the other group, the discussions initially were held in English with one student functioning as a

Japanese-English English-Japanese translator. Although the time frame of the meetings had been determined by the group leaders initially, the actual meetings were lengthy (up to 5 h) and the discussions lively. At the beginning, both groups, which the instructor monitored more closely, gathered indiscriminately data on energy policy, energy production, and energy needs of Japan. The next meetings were set up by the group leaders themselves, although it became increasingly more difficult to motivate all group members to attend all meetings. Often, a more flexible approach was used by the group leaders insofar as group members were allowed to leave the meetings after they had delivered and presented their designated work load. Also, while at the beginning the instructor was asked to attend the meetings, in later weeks, the instructor was asked to take part in only part of the meeting or was asked not to take part in the meeting at all.

Ten days before the actual debate all groups had a rough draft of their respective speeches for the debate. Although not expressly asked, all groups chose to use Powerpoint presentations. The Powerpoint files were sent to and checked by the instructor some days in advance of the actual debate. A dry-run at the actual debate site was offered, but only one group took avail of this opportunity.

6. The actual debate

The instructor had asked that all students participate in the actual debate. While one or more students would deliver the actual speech delineating the stance of the group on the future energy policy of Japan, other students of the group were asked to make up an attack and a defense team, where the own presentation was to be defended and the other two groups presentations to be challenged. The actual talks were given in English and had an average duration of 15 min. After a 5 min. break, the two opposing teams would challenge the presenting team on its energy policy. In all, 30 min. were allotted to each team's presentation. The winning group of the debate was chosen by a jury panel consisting of professors of IGSES, of non-academic staff of the global COE and of the Institute of Materials Chemistry and Engineering (IMCE). The winning team was presented with a trophy. All participants of the course received a commendation.



Member of the debate class.

7. Personal Evaluation of the Course

An English debate class such as the one described above will in the shortness of time have little effect on upgrading the English language proficiency of the students, but it does help the students to be more comfortable in addressing scientific issues in English. Furthermore, the participants of the class had to work together with people they were not familiar with to bring together a viable product (the presentation for the debate) in a very limited amount of time. Thus, students of very different scientific backgrounds and interests had to cooperate towards a common goal with all the group dynamics such an action involves. The group leader and sub leader have experienced group management, which includes the motivation of the individual group members during the process. Lastly, for me as the teacher, the class has been a memorable learning experience.

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