

EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF A COURSE BASED ON A MULTILITERACIES-LED PEDAGOGY

James E. Owens

English Language Institute, Kanda University of International Studies

ABSTRACT

A Multiliteracies pedagogy suggests a new way of perceiving the idea of 'literacies' that is more compatible with the modern world, rather than the traditional one-dimensional view of literacy. It involves providing access to what learners really need in order for them to empower themselves by becoming functional, effective and successful members of modern society, where older, simpler models of teaching literacy are arguably less relevant. With this in mind, a new curriculum for a Foundational Literacies course has been developed at a Japanese university. In this paper the process of design is described, and student responses to the new course, in the form of answers to a survey, are examined. The results suggest the course has been successful to a large degree. The course is undergoing constant re-evaluation. Reading about this process may prove useful for other teachers and course designers who currently find themselves in similar situations.

INTRODUCTION

At a university in Japan, Freshman students in the English Department were until recently obliged to take Basic Reading and Basic Writing courses. The shortcomings of these courses are outlined in Owens (2012). A decision was subsequently made to change academic direction. This was also influenced by Kramsch (2006), who suggests that language courses should focus more on symbolic competence rather than the hitherto emphasised communicative proficiency, typically viewed as a set of distinguishable cognitive skills. The institution thus decided that all curricula within the English Language Institute (ELI) were to follow a teaching pedagogy inspired by the Multiliteracies approach, a term first coined and advocated by the New London Group (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, Kalantzis, Kress, Luke, Luke, Michaels, & Nakata, 1996).

In this paper, this pedagogy is explained, and one newly created course that was trialled using this approach with high tier students is described. Finally, the course is evaluated in terms of how successful it has been in meeting its aims, by appraising student responses to surveys. The feedback is broadly very positive; however, it also offers some suggestions for improving the course that are worth consideration. It is hoped that educators working in all contexts will find this process constructive to their own efforts in course design and evaluation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multiliteracies

A Multiliteracies pedagogy suggests a pluralistic, "broader view of literacy" that accounts for the "...multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today" (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 60). In short, functioning well in modern society requires a larger range of competencies than the traditional four skills approach; it necessitates a capacity to interact in many different ways with many different people.

In this context, 'multi-' is ambiguous. On one level, it suggests a rejection of "the rules of a single, standard form of the national language" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012, p. 1). More pertinently, 'multi-' also denotes "multimodality" (p. 2). The world no longer operates, and arguably never has, in simple written text: "...the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on" (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 64). Older, simpler models of teaching literacy that focus solely on the ability to read and write traditional text formats are losing relevancy. Additionally, a plethora of literature advocates against teaching reading and writing separately (e.g. Grabe, 2001). Thus, the aforementioned Basic Writing and Basic Reading courses were replaced by an integrated Foundational Literacies (FL) course, which was first trialled with only advanced stream students.

Course Objectives

The Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) recently introduced a policy of awarding generous grants to institutions able to send students away on scholarships to universities in English-speaking countries. In order to be eligible for such scholarships, students need to achieve high scores in certain proficiency tests, the most widely accepted example being the TOEFL test.

There were therefore a series of outcomes that the newly-created FL course set out to reach:

1. To replace an outdated, flawed Basic Skills course,
2. To make the new integrated course compatible with the aims of a Multiliteracies-based pedagogical approach to learning,
3. To ensure the course improves learners' TOEFL scores, without reducing the classes to a 'teaching the test' formula,
4. To make the content more relevant to learners' actual lives and needs both in a Japanese context and also for study abroad.

A decision was reached to make the course genre-based in terms of organisation. In this regard, the committee was inspired by curriculum development taking place in other institutions around the world, for example Georgetown University (Byrnes, Crane, Maxim, & Sprang, 2006) in the USA, and the successful manipulation of genre-based courses to improve students' writing ability in South East Asia (Chaisiri, 2010). Using genre as an organising principle is particularly relevant to the goal of making the content relevant to learners' lives, as "genre pedagogies" utilise "...texts that students will have to write in their target contexts, thereby supporting learners to participate effectively in the world outside the ESL classroom" (Hyland, 2007, p. 48).

In relation to the principle of learner empowerment, genre-based approaches are therefore useful because genre directly relates "the social purpose of a text to language structure"

(Cope & Kalantzis, 2012, p. 126). Thus, such approaches help learners to acquire "...the power of choice and the linguistic potential to join new realms of social activity and social power" (p. 129) by enabling them to achieve "genre awareness" (Johns, 2008).

The desirable outcome would be for learners on this new course to become familiar with a variety of different genres and the uses of language located in a social context. As part of this, learners should be able to critically analyse texts.

In terms of course objectives, we wanted students to reach an improved level of competency in the following areas by the end of the academic year:

- understand reading and writing as a form of communication and understand how language is organized in different texts and why
- develop their own voice in writing for different audiences
- understand how to read and write texts that exist around us in the (digital and non-digital) world
- enjoy reading and writing in English
- participate in online contexts
- be able to critically analyse texts
- develop skills and vocabulary for the TOEFL exam

The following section briefly describes the new FL course that has been designed with the above objectives in mind.

COURSE OUTLINE

The FL course consists of two 90-minute lessons a week, taking place over two fifteen-week semesters per year. In the trial course, the first week focuses on an Introduction to the course, including the use of a Standard Reading Exercise (SRE) to be used as a weekly homework activity (Owens, 2014). The first unit focuses on the genre of Email, chosen for its clear relevancy in the lives of students. This unit runs for 3-4 weeks, followed by a Narrative unit (see Owens & Johnson, 2016). The final unit of the semester deals with the Product Review genre.

The second semester begins with a review of the Email unit, followed by a brief unit explaining ethos, pathos and logos as modes of persuasion. Neither of these two units are assessed. Following this is an Information Report unit, which includes an overview and some activities where students practise reading skills effective in TOEFL exams, in addition to key lessons dealing with plagiarism and citation. Finally, there is an Essay unit. Essay is not granted the high status it is often afforded in more traditional courses. The focus instead is on general mastery and understanding of a range of text and genre types. In the freshman year the course is designed to introduce some foundational principles of text organization, style and rhetoric, as related to different rhetorical situations and contexts. Nonetheless, within this context Essay is still considered an important genre for students to master, given the continued emphasis on academic skills that comprise their sophomore classes.

The curriculum intentionally moves from familiar genre types to more literary and, eventually, academic materials, covering what Byrnes et al. (2006) refer to as "primary,"

“blurred” and “secondary” discourses. This has the added benefit of gradually familiarising learners with more difficult or unfamiliar texts, similar to those they are likely to encounter in the TOEFL test at the end of the academic year. At the end of each unit, students produce their own original examples of the relevant text type, to show they are aware of the key features (in terms of organisation, lexicogrammar, format, layout, appropriacy, register...etc) of each genre. These examples are assessed and form the bulk of their final grade. Other assessed aspects of the course include the aforementioned SRE, vocabulary components (Owens & Reed, 2017), and occasional class blogs.

A decision was reached to make the course digital-based, and to make it a requirement for all students taking this trial course to purchase iPads (with a view to broadening this requirement for all students and courses in the future). Most materials for the course were made available online or in the form of iBooks. What follows is an evaluation of student responses to a survey asking for feedback on the new course.

COURSE EVALUATION

Each year a digital survey is given to students at the end of the course in which they are invited to offer feedback. The extent to which students can be objective in knowing what is best for their own learning needs is, of course, questionable. Nonetheless, anonymous surveys allow a platform for honest student reaction, as their opinions may be more reticent in the classroom for a range of cultural reasons. This paper evaluates responses from the 2014-5 academic year, as this was the first year the course in its current form was fully expanded to all 6 top-tier classes.

The answers are overwhelmingly positive. One limitation is that only those teachers working on the committee administered the survey to their students, meaning only three of the six classes responded to the survey, amounting to 58 respondents in total. The implications of this will be discussed later.

Course Aims

In Question 1, students were asked to evaluate, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) how much they agreed with each statement (the objectives of the course). An average score of above 3 would therefore suggest an overall positive appraisal. Ideal marks would score between 4 and 5.

The responses are summarised and weighted in Table 1 (below). As can be seen, all sections scored an average mark of above 4 (i.e. somewhere between agree and strongly agree) with one exception. This was especially the case with Course Objectives 1 and 3, which scored 4.62 and 4.56 respectively. Objective 7 was the only statement that did not obtain a weighted average score of above 4, with as many as 12% of respondents feeling that they disagreed with the idea that the course had helped improve their TOEFL skills and vocabulary. Even with regard to this objective, however, the most popular answers were agree and strongly agree.

The course, then, seems to have been especially useful for helping students “understand” the way different texts and genres operate (hence strong answers for 1 and 3), but less successful in helping achieve high TOEFL scores.

Table 1: Responses to Question 1 - Evaluation of course objectives

	strongly disagree	disagree	no strong opinion	agree	strongly agree	Total	Weighted Average
The course has helped me to understand reading and writing as a form of communication and understand how language is organized in different texts and why.	1.72% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	31.03% 18	67.24% 39	58	4.62
The course has helped me to develop my own voice in writing for different audiences.	0.00% 0	1.72% 1	6.90% 4	34.48% 20	56.90% 33	58	4.47
The course has helped me to understand how to read and write texts that exist around us in the (digital and non-digital) world.	1.75% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	36.84% 21	61.40% 35	57	4.56
The course has helped me to enjoy reading and writing in English.	0.00% 0	7.02% 4	7.02% 4	33.33% 19	52.63% 30	57	4.32
The course has helped me to participate in online contexts.	1.72% 1	1.72% 1	13.79% 8	44.83% 26	37.93% 22	58	4.16
The course has helped me to be able to critically analyse texts.	3.45% 2	3.45% 2	6.90% 4	32.76% 19	53.45% 31	58	4.29
The course has helped me to develop skills and vocabulary for the TOEFL exam.	1.72% 1	10.34% 6	13.79% 8	37.93% 22	36.21% 21	58	3.97

Usefulness

The next question asked students to rate the usefulness of each genre/unit (see Table 2). Again, this produced very positive results overall with all units/genres rated very useful. This was especially true of Email (4.88) and Essay (4.77). In order from most useful to least useful, students rated the units as: Email, Essay, Information Report, Product Review, Narrative.

The first three of the above all scored a weighted average of above 4. The latter two scored slightly under. As many as 19.2% of respondents found the Narrative unit not at all/not very useful. This is a relative complaint, however, as the most frequent answers were quite (32.7%) or very (30.8%) useful. More specifically, a couple of students stated, in the free comment

section, that they had a “hard time finding purpose (sic) of doing narrative and product review.” This suggests that the objectives of these units need to be made more explicit.

Table 2: Question 2 - Usefulness

	not at all useful	not very useful	no strong opinion	quite useful	very useful	Total	Weighted Average
Unit 1: Email	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.54% 6	88.46% 46	52	4.88
Unit 2: Narrative	1.92% 1	17.31% 9	17.31% 9	32.69% 17	30.77% 16	52	3.73
Unit 3: Product Review	0.00% 0	11.76% 6	15.69% 8	41.18% 21	31.37% 16	51	3.92
Unit 4: Information Report	0.00% 0	1.96% 1	5.88% 3	33.33% 17	58.82% 30	51	4.49
Unit 5: Essay	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	23.08% 12	76.92% 40	52	4.77

Interest

The results for level of interest in each genre/unit (Table 3) were also very encouraging. Three units scored a weighted average rating of higher than 4 and the other two came close (3.98 and 3.94). In order from highest level of interest to lowest, the students rated the genres as: Narrative, Email, Product Review, Essay, Information Report.

This is almost the exact opposite of the order in which students rated usefulness. While there are many feasible explanations for this inverse correlation, one could be cultural: there may be a tendency, perhaps, reinforced by the Japanese education system, to deem anything that seems arduous and less fun to be intrinsically more useful than anything they do not associate with hard work. Regardless of the reason, however, all units received overall positive ratings.

Table 3: Question 3 - Interest

	not at all interesting	not very interesting	no strong opinion	quite interesting	very interesting	Total	Weighted Average
Unit 1: Email	0.00% 0	5.77% 3	7.69% 4	34.62% 18	51.92% 27	52	4.33
Unit 2: Narrative	0.00% 0	5.77% 3	5.77% 3	36.54% 19	51.92% 27	52	4.35
Unit 3: Product Review	0.00% 0	7.84% 4	11.76% 6	45.10% 23	35.29% 18	51	4.08
Unit 4: Information Report	0.00% 0	5.88% 3	17.65% 9	52.94% 27	23.53% 12	51	3.94
Unit 5: Essay	1.92% 1	11.54% 6	11.54% 6	36.54% 19	38.46% 20	52	3.98

Difficulty

In terms of difficulty (Table 4) the ideal weighted score would be between 3 and 4 (i.e. between just right and quite difficult) with students feeling challenged but not overwhelmed, which a score of 5 (very difficult) might indicate. Anything lower than 3 is not ideal. No student awarded a score of 1 to any unit, and every unit scored on average between 3 and 4. Additionally, the predominant answer for each unit was either 'just right' or 'quite difficult'. Overall, this is a very pleasing set of results.

Table 4: Question 4 - Difficulty level

	too easy	quite easy	difficulty level was just right	quite difficult	very difficult	Total	Weighted Average
Unit 1: Email	0.00% 0	19.23% 10	51.92% 27	25.00% 13	3.85% 2	52	3.43
Unit 2: Narrative	0.00% 0	23.08% 12	32.69% 17	32.69% 17	11.54% 6	52	3.33
Unit 3: Product Review	0.00% 0	15.69% 8	37.25% 19	37.25% 19	9.80% 5	51	3.41
Unit 4: Information Report	0.00% 0	6.00% 3	34.00% 17	44.00% 22	16.00% 8	50	3.70
Unit 5: Essay	0.00% 0	3.85% 2	19.23% 10	50.00% 26	26.92% 14	52	4.00

From easiest to most difficult, the students ranked the units as: Email, Narrative, Product Review, Information Report, Essay. This negatively correlates with the order in which students rated interest, and positively with the order in which they ranked usefulness, with Narrative considered easiest, most interesting, and least useful, and Essay most difficult and most useful, but (with the exception of Information Report) the least interesting. This lends some weight to the aforesaid cultural explanation that Japanese students might find difficulty inherently valuable. Countering this is the opinion of one student, who stated in the comments section that he/she values "interesting" activities in class that are "...useful to make students be interested in reading and writing (sic)".

Additional Comments

In a non-compulsory section of the survey, 41 respondents voluntarily commented on what they enjoyed most. Of these, 20 responses pointed to how useful they found the Email unit. Eight similarly praised the Essay unit, three the Narrative unit, and another three said they liked everything. The remaining comments focused on other details of the course.

In response to a question inviting them to discuss aspects of the course they did not like, only 28 people replied, and of these 11 responded to say that there was nothing they wished to see improved at all, for example: "I want you to continue your unique and wonderful class." Of the remaining 17 replies, seven commented on the Narrative unit. One of these stated, "Narrative unit was interesting. However, I was not pretty sure that it was useful for studying English." Similarly, another wrote, "Narrative was interesting for me, but I cannot find the clear goal or purpose of writing my own experience." As stated above, perhaps these issues

can be solved by more effective communication of the course objectives, and/or by making the materials themselves more directly relevant to students' lives.

Four students offered mild criticism of Product Review, and three focused on Essay (specifically its difficulty). Other issues that were raised by single complainants were dislike of the Information Report, aversion towards having their errors corrected, and needing more help in distinguishing the difference between formal and informal vocabulary. The numbers here are low in comparison with the positive comments above, but they can still be addressed.

Components of the course

Students were asked to rate the different elements of the course (Table 5), and again most of the answers were very positive. In order from most useful to least useful, they featured as follows:

- Assignments (4.58),
- Classroom work (4.51),
- Standard reading exercise (4.38),
- Vocabulary lists/tests (4.38),
- Class blogs (3.74).

In the case of the first three, a majority of respondents rated them very useful, and the first four all scored a weighted average higher than 4 in terms of usefulness. Most satisfyingly, none of the respondents considered assignments either not at all useful or not very useful.

However, class blogs scored a slightly disappointing 3.74, and 3.9% of students considered the vocabulary lists not at all useful, which is some cause for concern. The use of blogs itself might not be a problem, however, as two students commented on how "interesting" they were and how they are a "good tool, because we could share other opinions and lifestyle". Rather, the problem seems to be a failure to use the blogs well or often enough. As one student expressed it, "I think if we had used more often the class blog, it would have been more useful." Perhaps it needs to be used more regularly and consistently, and more connected with classroom activities.

Table 5: Question 7 - How would you rate the usefulness of each component of the course?

	not at all useful	not very useful	no strong opinion	quite useful	very useful	Total	Weighted Average
Classroom work (the iBooks, Moodle...etc)	0.00% 0	1.96% 1	7.84% 4	27.45% 14	62.75% 32	51	4.51
Class Blogs	0.00% 0	12.00% 6	26.00% 13	38.00% 19	24.00% 12	50	3.74
Vocabulary lists / tests	3.92% 2	3.92% 2	9.80% 5	47.06% 24	35.29% 18	51	4.06
The standard reading exercise	0.00% 0	2.00% 1	8.00% 4	40.00% 20	50.00% 25	50	4.38
Assignments	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	3.85% 2	34.62% 18	61.54% 32	52	4.58

Overall opinions of the course

Question 8 asked respondents to rate the overall course, and most students provided a very positive evaluation (Table 6). A huge majority (75%) rated the course as Excellent, with the remainder mostly answering Good (23.1%). When asked for suggestions for improving the course, there were 19 responses. Eleven of these said “nothing” could be improved, or simply pointed out positives. The remaining eight all had different suggestions.

Table 6: Question 8 - Overall opinion of the course

Generally speaking, how useful do you feel the course has been overall?	
Answer Choices	Responses
– Very poor	0.00% 0
– Poor	1.92% 1
– Okay	0.00% 0
– Good	23.08% 12
– Excellent	75.00% 39
Total	52

One student suggested the assignments be better timed so as not to coincide with tests and heavy workloads they were receiving from other courses. Other suggestions included the request that, “If you tell us the purpose of each homework or assignment beforehand, perhaps we can understand better why those are useful for us,” and wanting the teacher to pick up on classmates’ use of L1 in class. All these points refer to how teachers could become more vigilant rather than suggesting a change in course materials or direction.

Two students wanted more assignments, with one requesting an additional Letter unit, and another wanting blogs and the SRE to have their own assignments. These last two elements are already taken into account in the homework portion of grading, and an additional Letter unit would not be feasible, in terms of time available or workload. However, one possible solution here is the inclusion of some basic writing tips, or lessons contrasting letter-writing with email, into the Email unit.

DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

The survey highlights some areas for possible improvement in developing the course for the future. One such example is whether there should be more focus on increasing TOEFL scores,

or if this will be covered in other courses. Most importantly, the objectives of the course need to be made more explicit, especially to learners who may be expecting a more traditional reading and writing course. It could be argued that they need to be weaned off an engrained obsession with hard work for its own sake that comes from years of rote-learning and cram schools. Treating students as adults and explaining the purpose and rationale for the work they are doing can only help motivate students to invest in their work more. Indeed, overall better communication with students would help in many regards. This is especially true when considering assignment deadlines, explaining the purpose of activities, and discouraging the use of Japanese in class.

There are also some clear limitations to the nature of this type of survey as an effective gauge of the quality of a course. However, this was an anonymous survey and it can be assumed that students answered honestly. Completion was not compulsory, and about half of all students responded. As with any voluntary survey, this affects the reliability of the results, as it can be presumed that responses come principally from the most motivated students, and therefore those with the most positive attitudes towards the course. More pertinently in this situation, only teachers working on the course development committee administered the survey to their students. These teachers were likely more invested in the materials and therefore more motivated in guaranteeing their success. This would clearly have an effect on results, too, albeit more indirectly. Additionally, given that Chen, Lee, and Stevenson (1995) suggest respondents from certain Asian countries (especially Japan) have a cultural tendency to choose a 'no opinion' option if given the opportunity, future surveys should only allow students four potential responses to the multiple-choice questions.

On the whole, the course seems to be popular and challenging, with the results of the survey proving it to be well-balanced in terms of usefulness, level of interest and difficulty. Most of the materials at this stage need little alteration, but the course should be subject to ongoing evaluation and potential change. These surveys, administered annually, offer one such effective way of doing so, and are thus recommended to all curriculum designers, in any country or educational context. They are easy to design and administer, in paper or digital form, and are relevant to all teaching contexts, regardless of pedagogy or available tools.

CONCLUSION

This paper hopefully gives some indication as to how a Multiliteracies-inspired pedagogical approach has been followed to create a course that sufficiently challenges and empowers our learners, in response to recent ideas in the field of applied linguistics research. This is an exciting period of change at our institution, as we go about updating all our ELI curricula. There will no doubt be issues and further changes, as the course undergoes a continual re-evaluation and design process, which will hopefully ensure its long-term success. Future projects could entail looking in depth at the annual collection of student feedback and responding by making additional improvements to the course. Specifically, projects are underway to make adjustments to the Standard Reading Exercise and Vocabulary components of the course.

There are many institutions currently redesigning their courses to better reflect newer attitudes in the world of language teaching. In this context, our attempts are one such

example, and this paper will hopefully be of help to any teachers or course designers who are attempting similar processes.

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