

# **The English Communication Course and its Female Students: A Diachronic Overview**

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## **Abstract**

The English Communication Course has periodically reported on the progress of its students at various points during their education. In this paper, we take a different approach in two ways. First, we focus only on female students. Second, we consider their situation at four specific time points: the end of each academic year. We chose this method because female students are often reported to encounter difficulty in finding work in comparison to male students. By focusing on female students at the end of each grade, we may be better able to teach and advise them with regard to their future career opportunities as they move through the program.

Findings include that the female students applying to join the English Communication Course from the start of second grade have a wide range of personal and professional ambitions. Current second grade female students are making steady progress on their proficiency as measured by standardized tests. Female third grade students are particularly invested in their education, with nine out of ten current students taking part in some form of KSU program or studying abroad independently during the summer. With regard to 4<sup>th</sup> grade students, at the time of writing 85% of those female students graduating in March 2013 had already found jobs.

## **Introduction**

The English Communication Course was started in 2008, with the aim of providing a practical education to students with an interest in the language and culture of English-speaking countries. The practical nature of the course can be seen from its curriculum, which provides a number of career-related opportunities for the students; the main seminar class is set up as a workshop, and it covers a range of useful skills that aim to

help students post-graduation. Furthermore, the English Communication Course holds a field trip every Autumn, during which students' communicative competence is assessed: the results of the field trip are subsequently used as a benchmark for students' future development. Finally, the Course offers its students frequent interaction opportunities with visitors from overseas. To date, we have hosted students from both British and North American universities, and have run a number of cross-cultural events with them each year.

Since its inception, the course has always attracted a large number of female students; for example, in some Workshop classes two out of every three students are female.

KSU has made its female students something of a priority recently, with a number of changes to the campus and available services aimed at making the university a better place for them. In Japan, it is often reported that female students have a tougher daily situation than their male counterparts (see, for example, Simon-Maeda, 2003); furthermore, these disadvantages do not end when they graduate; in fact, female students often face greater difficulty in finding work.

Given its practical focus, the English Communication Course could usefully benefit from studying its female students in terms of their intended careers, and this paper is a first attempt to conduct such a study. Of specific interest is the manner in which our students progress over time, from entering the course as new second grade students to when they graduate and enter society at the end of their fourth grade. Through a deeper understanding of our students and their development, the Course's teachers hope to be able to improve their teaching and ability to provide guidance.

With this in mind, at the end of the academic year 2012 the Course teachers solicited feedback from all its current and prospective female students, in addition to obtaining data from KSU's Language Education and Research Center, and the Career Center. Specifically we focused on different aspects for students as they reached the end of their current academic grade. For fourth grade students, we considered their job-hunting to be of paramount importance, thus this data is what we concentrate on in this report. For third year students, we focus on their extra-curricular language activities and for second grade students their language development. As for first grade students, we took a broader approach by asking about their aspirations for future language study and career plans.

## First grade students

Students wishing to join the English Communication Course meet with their prospective workshop teachers as part of a selection process. At this time, we typically ask them to complete an anonymous survey in order to better understand some part of the educational experiences KSU offers. In previous years, for example, we have chosen to focus on the students' awareness of the study abroad options at KSU (Carter et al., 2012). In this year's case, we decided to broaden the survey to include students' hopes for the future, both while at KSU and after they graduate. Specifically, we asked students whether they already had a particular career in mind; which language courses they were interested in; which exams they planned to take; and when it was that they were first aware of the English Communication Course at KSU. While students of both genders completed the survey, for the purposes of this study we report only the data from the 14 female Japanese respondents.

Table 1.  
*Student employment aspirations*

<i><b>Job sought</b></i>	<i><b>No.</b></i>
English teacher	3
English-related work	2
Japanese foreign language teacher	1
Japanese-English translator	1
Travel agent	1
Airline staff	1
Undecided	5

*Note:* N=14

As shown by Table 1, a majority of prospective English Communication Course students have a clear idea of what they want to do after they graduate. Furthermore, a number of these positions are clearly congruent with the Course's curriculum, and indeed, a number of our former students have found similar jobs.

Strongly connected to students' career aspirations is the topic of proficiency tests and qualifications. The English communication course teachers have experience in teaching a wide range of well-known exams, such as the TOEIC, TOEFL, Eiken, IELTS, and Cambridge tests. Our curriculum supports students interested in such tests, as does that

of the LERC. We asked the prospective English Communication Course students which of the three most common exams they planned to take while at KSU. The results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Student interest in tests of English proficiency*

<b>Test</b>	<b>Will take</b>	<b>Will not take</b>	<b>Undecided</b>
TOEIC	14	0	0
TOEFL	7	1	6
Eiken	8	2	4

Note: N=14

All students stated that they would take the TOEIC test while at KSU, perhaps reflecting its importance in the curriculum as well as for job-hunting. Half or more of the students also stated that they would take additional exams, with only very few rejecting the TOEFL and Eiken tests outright.

One of the ways for students to improve their proficiency is to take courses offered by the Language Education and Research Center. Many current English Communication Course students have benefited from these courses, and our earlier studies have shown that student awareness of them is high, even in first grade. Table three shows the students' stated intentions with regard to the Career English Program, the Four Skills class, and the TOEIC -focused, a TOEIC-focused special class.

Table 3.

*Student interest in LERC courses*

<b>Course</b>	<b>Will take</b>	<b>Will not take</b>	<b>Undecided</b>
Career English Program	12	1	1
Four Skills	11	2	1
TOEIC Special Class	9	5	0

Note: N=14

As can be seen from the table, the LERC's language courses are very popular among the Communication Course's female prospective students.

Furthermore, both the LERC and the Department of International Studies of Culture also offer opportunities for students to develop their skills outside of the classroom. In the case of the LERC, there is a chance for students to gain work experience through its “Job-training” program, which has both domestic and international versions. Our own department also offers chances to experience life outside of the university through a short summer program in an English-speaking country (kaigai kenshu) and a semester-length period at a foreign university through a student exchange program (kaigai ryugaku). In recent years, all four of these offerings have been popular with female English Communication Course students. Table 4 shows the interest of the prospective students intending to join our course from April 2013. According to what they reported, the

Table 4.

*Student interest in off-campus programs*

<u>Course</u>	<u>Interested</u>	<u>Not interested</u>	<u>Undecided</u>
Domestic job-training	7	4	3
International job-training	9	1	4
Summer study abroad program	13	1	0
International exchange program	9	2	3

*Note:* N=14

students are most interested in the summer program, which is in line with our experiences to date. However, the other three courses are still popular, with even the lowest-ranked of them garnering interest from 50% of the applicants.

Overall, then, our future students are broadly similar to their predecessors in that they are knowledgeable about, and interested in, what KSU has to offer them. One interesting feature of the female students’ surveys is that the numbers reported here are slightly higher than in previous years, which may signify that female students are more interested in the programs than male students. A second interesting feature is that a majority of the students (8) reported knowing about the English Communication Course before they entered the university. This confirms our earlier research which suggested that the Course is becoming known among high school teachers.

**Second grade students**

At the end of the selection process, students will be assigned to a workshop teacher,

and will spend one year in that class. The twin aims of the workshop are the students' language development and helping them to reach their personal goals. For many students, these goals will in fact require evidence of their language skill, thus, looking at students' test scores effectively encompasses both of the workshop's aims.

As we have previously reported, from second grade students will either continue taking the TOEIC Bridge test, or move on to the TOEIC itself (Carter et al., 2011). To date, we have studied the lower level students, as they need more help in reaching the test scores they need in order to achieve their goals. For the current second grade students, we asked them to report their scores to their workshop teacher, and we also asked the LERC to provide any scores that they had.

At the time of writing, it was possible to obtain scores for five of the 10 female second grade students. In part, this is due to the fact that not all students will take TOEIC tests at

Table 5.

*Mean test scores at two time points*

<u>University Entrance</u>	<u>End of 2nd grade</u>
TOEIC Bridge 140	TOEIC 537

*Note: N=5*

the same time, and we have to rely on students' willingness to report their scores in many cases. Despite this, we can make a comparison between the students when they entered KSU, and their TOEIC scores at the end of second grade. Table 5 shows the scores.

As can be seen from Table 5, the students entered the university with a mean placement score of 140 on the TOEIC Bridge and by the end of second grade had moved on to the full TOEIC with a mean score of 537. According to the test makers, a TOEIC Bridge score of 140 is approximately equivalent to 395 on the TOEIC. As such, we can say that the female students in the English Communication Course have made progress since entering the university.

### **Third grade students**

If second grade is a time when our students are focused on their language

development, third grade provides an opportunity for them to do something practical with their skills. While the English Communication Course provides a more challenging selection of workshop and other classes in third grade, for students wishing to conduct a conventional approach to job-hunting, it may also be the best – and last – opportunity to spend time outside of Japan.

As previously documented in Table 4, KSU provides a number of chances for students to develop themselves outside of the classroom. These opportunities range from an internship conducted locally to a 6-month stay as an exchange student in a UK or US university. Of 10 third grade female students, seven took advantage of a KSU-backed program, while two studied abroad independently. The paths they took are shown in Table 6.

Table 6.  
*Third grade students' activities*

<u>Activity</u>	<u>No.</u>
Domestic job-training	1
International job-training	3
Summer study abroad program	1
International exchange program	2
Independent study	2

*Note:* N=9

Five of the nine students detailed in Table 6 also provided us with TOEIC scores. The mean TOEIC score for those third grade female students who reported them was 613. In comparison to the scores we already reported for second grade students (M=537), this suggests that the third grade students are developing their proficiency in conjunction with their activities outside of the university. Furthermore, as nine out of 10 third grade female students made use of their time to gain experience and broaden their perspectives, we may be able to conclude that they are setting themselves up well for their final year at university.

#### **Fourth grade students**

Fourth grade students have the opportunity to do their own research and write a graduation thesis, but for the majority of students their main focus will be on securing post-graduation employment. Within the English Communication Course, a number of students continue to study in classes and to write theses, while a small

number prepare themselves for post-graduate education; however, as a measure of the practical impact of the course it is the results of those hoping to find work that we should focus on. In order to ensure the accuracy of our data, we contacted the Career Center, whose staff provided us with the information we report below. Table 7 shows the students' situation regarding job offers as of January 2013.

Table 7.

*Fourth grade students' future employment*

<b>Sector</b>	<b>No.</b>
Education	1
Fashion retail	2
Medical retail	1
Logistics	1
Tourism	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>

*Note* : Number of graduating students = 7

As can be seen from the table, 85% of graduating 4<sup>th</sup> grade female students had already secured an offer at the time of writing. The Japan Times contemporaneously reported a national average of 75.6% for female students (Jan 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013). While we wish that all of our students could find work early in their 4<sup>th</sup> grade, we are encouraged that the female students in the English Communication Course are performing at least as well as those at other universities nationally.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to understand our students' situations as a means of improving our ability to guide and teach them in the future. In order to do this, we looked at data from three sources – the Career Center, the LERC, and our own surveys – at four points in the students' lives: the end of the academic year from first to fourth grade. This diachronic approach may enable us to use the experience of older students for their juniors' benefit. One reason that this may be possible is that as a general finding, when our data replicated something we had studied in previous years, the cases matched quite closely. Specific examples of this include the incoming students' prior knowledge of our course, the increase in test scores as students progress through



the grades, and the students' enthusiasm for KSU programs such as job-training and kaigai kenshu. Overall, then, it seems that the English Communication Course has a certain amount of stability across time.

As for the specific findings of the study, we have seen that the English Communication Course attracts applicants with a wide range of career interests who, furthermore, understand well the opportunities KSU affords them. A large majority of the female students who applied to join our course next year stated their interest in taking English proficiency exams, joining the off-campus activities, and studying with the LERC as well as in our classes.

Second grade students showed positive increases in their test scores, with a mean score of over 535 at the end of second grade, an increase of approximately 140 points since they entered the university. Third grade students not only continued this trend, with a mean score in excess of 610, but also with 90% of students taking part in activities that took them away from the university primarily as interns or exchange students. Finally, 85% of our graduating fourth grade students have already secured positions in the workforce, which is about 10% above the national average for female students.

### **Future directions**

12 out of 20 students starting our course next year are female, and the data we reported here for grades two to four may be useful for them when trying to reach their goals. While the approach we have taken here certainly has its merits, it might be even better to track a cohort through its entire time as members of the Course, as this would lead to a deeper understanding of our students, their needs, and ways in which we can help them.

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