BLACK Grant

Coordinating web-based language study: a management policy report

I. Introduction

This report is based on a presentation given at the “2nd Faculty Development Workshop: Exchanging teaching methods for Integrated English” held on 10 March, 2015. The presentation discussed the results of a survey that sought to assess student perceptions of 1. web-based language study using the “Super Eigo” system with “Academic Express2” and 2. TOEFL. The presentation focused on analyzing student perceptions of web-based study and TOEFL in order to inform teaching methods. This report differs in two ways: first, it does not address the TOEFL questions, which will be taken up elsewhere; second, while addressing the student perceptions revealed in the survey, this report turns the focus primarily to policy and organisational management strategies. Accordingly, the style here is more akin to a management policy report.

II. Background

Academic management
MEXT advises in its guidance documents that all universities, as part of the internationalisation reforms, should evaluate the state of their organisational standards through self-evaluation (MEXT 2012). Quality assurance processes are cited with a view to strengthening organisational and management functions (MEXT 2011, 2014).

The leadership of the University of Tsukuba has aligned with MEXT policies and incentives toward developing internationalisation at Tsukuba. From a quality assurance standpoint, effective academic management in an intercultural workplace environment is a necessary feature of an internationalised university.

Aspiring to educational targets for Tsukuba students in the form of learning outcomes or performance achievements is predicated on effective academic management systems.

Coordinated curriculum
“Super Eigo” with “Academic Express2” (hereafter, “Super Eigo”) is a web-based English language study system produced by the Tokyo-based company CHieru Co.
Ltd. In 2012, Super Eigo was adopted at the University of Tsukuba by the English Section of the then-Foreign Language Center (renamed in 2015 as the Foreign Language Section in the restructuring of the new Center for Education of Global Communication). Super Eigo was planned for use as common teaching material in the first year course Integrated English I, II starting from the 2013-2014 academic year. Integrated English has 60 class sections per term, with approximately 20 instructors (full-time and part-time) and over 2,000 students enrolled. Super Eigo was described in the English Section’s Curriculum Committee documents as “common teaching materials” in a “coordinated curriculum” for Integrated English. As common teaching material it was required for purchase by all 1st year students enrolled in the Integrated English course in the 2013-14 and 2014-15 academic years.

III. Method

The survey was web-based using the online survey tool “Survey Monkey”. The bilingual Japanese/English survey consisted of twenty questions spread over six pages. There were four sections to the survey: 1. Research Consent Form, 2. Biographic data, 3. Super Eigo, and 4. TOEFL. First, respondents were asked to read a research consent form with the option to agree or disagree. Clicking disagree put them directly to the end of the survey. Agreeing would go to page 2 to start the survey. Page 2 consisted of 5 non-identifying biographic data questions. Page 3 started the Super Eigo section with the single question about use of Super Eigo. Answering “No” put respondents directly to the final section, TOEFL. Only users of Super Eigo answered the follow-up detail questions. Likewise, a “no” answer for the first TOEFL question led directly to the end of the survey.

The primary research questions were a. Is web-based study effective?; b. What makes for an effective coordinated curriculum? The research also sought to address “how many minutes of study per week for web-based study to be effective?” The survey questions on student perceptions targeted three specific areas: 1. Use patterns of Super Eigo, 2. Perception of the effectiveness of Super Eigo for language acquisition, 3. Perception of the importance of and priority given to TOEFL.

The survey was administered by eight instructors of Integrated English, in-class at the end of the 2014 Winter term. There were 559 respondents, with a 60/40 split between male and female participants. Survey results were distributed to the participating instructors. Each instructor received for their own use all data plus data for their own students’ responses. This report deals only with the category “all data”.

IV. Analysis – Super Eigo

Summary of results

68% of respondents said they used Super Eigo. Just under half of these users (48%)
said it was a good way to learn English, while 30% felt it helped them with their English. This 30% number parallels the 32% who said they liked Super Eigo. 92% used Super Eigo less than 10 minutes per week, including 50% who reported 0 minutes per week.

**Key findings**

One of the stated goals for Super Eigo web-based learning is to supplement student language-learning study time with independent study outside the classroom. It is uncontroversial to say that steady, regular study is beneficial to making gains in language learning. One question for the research was to consider “How many minutes per week for web-based study to be effective?” As this was a pilot study we asked the students to self-report their study time to check the range. The idea was that for a future study we might be able to compare study time with a range of performance indicators such as TOEFL scores or course grades. However, rather than needing to wait for some future study, this pilot study already yields an interesting result on the question of study time and effective learning. Surprisingly, the amount of time students spent doing Super Eigo was highly consistent. That is, they did not really do Super Eigo at all. Although about a third of users said they liked Super Eigo and felt that it helped them with their English, in practice 92% said they spent 10 minutes or less per week, with 50% reporting that they never used it (0 minutes). Therefore, despite 30% saying they felt it helped them with English, the numbers for study time suggest that any gains in language learning or marked improvement in English skills would be modest, at best. With near universal reporting of spending zero to 10 minutes at most per week, students simply did not use Super Eigo enough for it to have any significant impact on learning. In other words, for the vast majority of students surveyed, Super Eigo was inconsequential to their English language study.

**Discussion**

If the goal of making Super Eigo part of a coordinated curriculum was to help improve student learning, then this goal was not met for the students in the survey. Is web-based study effective? The survey does not answer that question. What we can say is that according to the survey, as a coordinated curriculum it did not work for these students, at this time, implemented in this way. Super Eigo was not effective for the simple reason that these students did not use it.

Nevertheless, the reasonable expectation is that under certain conditions web-based study is effective; furthermore, that for some students Super Eigo is in fact a positive language-learning tool. If true, these points only serve to highlight the missed opportunity to provide something of value to the population of students in this survey.

One might have concluded the main implication of the results of the survey is that Super Eigo does not work or that web-based language study is not effective. This, however, is not the main implication. The main implication of the results of the survey is that a coordinated curriculum actually requires coordination. A
coordinated curriculum for these students in this learning environment requires a
greater commitment to coordination in terms of planning, execution, evaluation,
data-gathering and research. If we replaced the Super Eigo case with a novel or a
textbook and followed the same implementation principles we are almost certain to
have comparable results. That is, students could be predicted to report a. for some
yes it is a good way of studying English; b. no, mostly they do not like it; and c. no
they do not have any real motivation to spend time for self-study. These patterns
are perhaps only exacerbated if we include in the scenario that student
requirements differ widely from section to section of the same course such that
overall grading may appear to be arbitrary, inconsistent or inconsequential toward
evaluation for the course.

V. Analysis – management practices

Context
The near universal non-participation reflected in the survey invites analysis of the
education management practices employed to implement Super Eigo as coordinated
curriculum. This section will argue that education management coordination was
insufficient to support successful adoption by faculty and students. Recommendations
are given for education management practices that help support the
implementation of using common teaching materials in a coordinated curriculum.

Background summary of practices
First year of use
2013-2014
For faculty, there was no managed system of coordination – voluntary or required –
put in place. Coordination was limited or absent. Instructor participation varied
widely or was absent. Students were nominally required to purchase, but in the first
year of implementation non-compliance was prevalent with a high number of
students failing to purchase the system. No coordinated data collection.

Second year of use
2014-2015
In the second year of system use, greater coordination was implemented for
students in the form of a first week orientation session. The academic calendar was
rearranged to start one week late exclusively within the English Section in order to
accommodate this first-week orientation session. The primary goal of the student
orientation seminars was to ensure registration and payment compliance. For
faculty members, course instructors were requested in curriculum committee
documents to incorporate the system into their syllabus for the course with the
implication of a soft-expectation of compliance. In other words, the system is
incorporated in the course at the discretion of the instructor with no standard
requirements or evaluation of use. For instructor training, introductory guidance is
provided as one part of a pre-term, two-hour seminar covering a range of general
faculty and computing matters. No coordinated data collection.
Coordination Issues
The issues in the coordination of Super Eigo can be summarized in seven points, as follows.

1. A functionally inoperative environment.
   For management of implementing Super Eigo as common teaching material, these three specifications were in place:
   i. Super Eigo was common teaching materials for Integrated English I, II
   ii. 1st year students must purchase Super Eigo
   iii. Use of Super Eigo in the Integrated English I, II was optional for instructors
   A key issue inhibiting success of the programme is that having all three of these specifications at the same time creates a functionally inoperative environment. To have a functional system any two of these is possible, but not all three. If Super Eigo is common teaching material for the course Integrated English AND students must purchase it, then some minimal standard for instructor use must be in place and consistently applied. If students must purchase Super Eigo AND it is optional for Integrated English instructors, then it cannot be common teaching material for this single course, Integrated English. If Super Eigo is common teaching material for Integrated English AND optional for instructors, then students cannot be required to purchase it. All three specifications at the same time creates a system that does not work. The system is functionally inoperative.

2. Not required to pass the course.
   All students were required to purchase the on-line service, yet in practice for the vast majority of students it was not part of the course and/or the minimum level of usage or achievement required to pass the course was low to none. In the first year, for more than 1000 students Super Eigo was not used at any time as any part of the course. Instructor self-reporting indicates that participation and usage levels increased in the second year (the time of the survey).

   CHieru Co. Ltd. is a Japanese company based in Japan with Japanese-native faculty as their target customer. In direct discussions and email communication, CHieru Co. Ltd. representatives indicated that their focus on a Japanese audience is the reason the company has at present no intention to develop a bilingual system (as other web-based language tools do, such as Word Engine) and no plans to provide the full administrative support materials in English (only basic task guides are given in English). The Super Eigo administrator/class management system is Japanese-language only. Administrative expertise for the system requires a relatively high level of Japanese literacy. Although some Non-Japanese faculty do have high levels of Japanese language ability, the majority of Integrated English courses were led by Non-Japanese instructors who lacked sufficient literacy to use the system with ease.

4. Organisational management of Super Eigo was limited or absent.
   Super Eigo was designated as common teaching material for the course, but no coordinated plan was in place for the 60 different sections taught by 20 different instructors. Although indicated as a coordinated curriculum, in the first year no directives were given for the use of Super Eigo. Specifically, there were no defining goals of the project. The functional strategy of its use as coordinated curriculum was
limited to student self-study. The idea of study self-study was useful in that it could be cited as the activity for the two-week recess period at the end of AB courses prior to final exams. In terms of organisational management, there was no coordinated rollout to build a momentum for successful adoption of the system. Without a coordinated plan, adoption was inconsistent, with many instructors omitting Super Eigo from the course altogether.

5. No data collection.
Over the two years of its use there was no coordinated measurement of outcomes or coordinated collection of data on student usage even though measurement and data collection are key features of the administrative functions in Super Eigo.

6. No evaluation of system.
Accordingly, project management planned no coordinated assessment of student participation and performance: there was no planned opportunity for feedback, nor any coordinated evaluation of the project. In April 2013, in the early stages of the Super Eigo programme and before full implementation, email alerts with detailed cautionary analysis were brought to the attention of the leadership of the Super Eigo project and English Section, but these were ignored.

7. No coordinated training strategy.
There was no coordinated strategy to train users and faculty in the optimal use of the system. The student orientation week focused on getting students signed up to Super Eigo and processing their payment. In terms of training for the system, this was limited to basic instructions for logging in and a general overview of the sections within Super Eigo, not a coordinated strategy for effective use of the system, which was left to the designs of individual instructors. No systematic training of faculty members.

Creating working management systems
Although there are different approaches to making a coordinated curriculum system that works, there are two fundamental steps necessary to successful implementation of a programme of this scale: 1. Measurable standards and 2. Roll out plan.

1. Measurable standards.
For the use of common teaching materials – if they are to be used at all – at the very least a minimum standard must be in place that is universally applied throughout all sections of the course and evaluated according to those standards. Developing a purposeful and effective standard requires research and careful planning toward achieving group consensus. The logic used in setting a standard should be fact-based and, by definition, designed to function as an incentive to learning and achievement in the target subject. Setting effective measurable standards takes time and dedication to do well; however, from a management system perspective the key issue is having a standard at all. If there is not some form of a baseline, measurable standard, then a coordinated curriculum is not the system fit for purpose for a programme involving 2000 students, 60 sections, and 20 instructors. Measurable standards are the backbone of using common teaching materials for a coordinated curriculum of this scale.
2. Roll out plan.
In order for a programme of this scale and requirements to have a chance at success, a roll out plan is necessary.

As an example of a roll out plan, see Google’s “Get ready, communicate, train” plan that is the foundation of their change management strategy for organisations adopting Google Apps. Especially relevant is the “Change management task timeline and checklist” on p. 10 of the document “gapps_change_management.pdf” downloaded August 2015 from http://setup.googleapps.com/Home/change-management

For a programme such as Super Eigo, a roll out plan means at least the following four elements:

i. Clearly and explicitly defined goals for use.
The academic goals of the system must be specific, measurable and accountable. General goals like "for student self-study" would be inadequate if the intention is for a high level of commitment and participation from students and instructors. These goals must answer fundamental questions like "why this system for these students?" "why now?" "why in this way?" Ideally, the goals are fact-based and align with departmental goals or organisational mission statements. For example, for Super Eigo, this could include something like the following: average TOEFL score improvement is a priority of the university (organisational goal), student vocabulary levels were identified as a factor in low TOEFL scores (fact-based data), completion of 300 minutes of Super Eigo has been shown to improve vocabulary levels for most students (fact-based data), therefore 300 minutes is the target study time to receive full marks for the assignment (specific, measurable, accountable). (Note: data here is not actual, merely a representative example). Clearly and explicitly defined goals which have meaning and purpose are essential to maximizing the successful adoption of the plan.

ii. Consciously build community
Consciously building community is synonymous with establishing the legitimacy and integrity fundamental to running a successful programme. Achieving consensus for standards is difficult and time consuming. Aligning research-supported standards with organisational goals helps give purpose and authority to the programme. Consciously building community around the programme is a primary duty for the leadership of the programme.

iii. Set out then promote extensively a plan of execution.
Provide step-by-step promotional guides. Carefully plan and schedule a deployment calendar. Develop a 'fool-proof' support framework: a hand-holding, carefully guided system that effectively promotes all necessary information to all relevant parties to get everyone (students, faculty, administration) on board to fulfil the aims of the programme. Too much communication is not possible here.
iv. Schedule extensive faculty sessions for training and support of those using Super Eigo, then evaluate results. Train a core group of two or three advanced users. Expand to a larger group of early adopters. Expand to the full group of users, including part-time faculty members.

Summary of lessons learned: recommendations for using Super Eigo as common teaching material in a coordinated curriculum

1. Create a project plan that includes the following items:
   i. Measurable standards: Define goals of the project, including a clear functional strategy that incorporates all instructors and all students for all sections of the course
   ii. Rollout plan: Systematic, on-going training and support process for faculty, students and related administration staff
   iii. Assessment: Coordinate collection of data to effectively measure outcomes and keep a record of results; assess student participation and performance

2. Provide English-language version of full CHieru Co. Ltd. Japanese manual (as other universities using the system have done)

VI. Limitations of the study

A limitation of the survey is that it covered less than one third of the total number of students and less than half of the instructors. Although the numbers surveyed are substantive, the full diversity of the cohort may not have been captured. In particular, Japanese faculty are underrepresented. It is possible that students in sections led by Japanese instructors may yield a different perspective. Usage of Super Eigo and inclusion in the course requirements may have been greater among Japanese faculty. For this reason, in order to provide the most accurate representation we had wanted to give all instructors the opportunity to participate in the survey. Perhaps overcautiously, we deemed it inappropriate for a blanket request to come directly from us; therefore, protocol channels were followed by requesting the then-English Section and Super Eigo leadership for distribution of notice of the survey to all faculty. As we received no response to this request, given the time constraints we proceeded with voluntary participation from those instructors we were able to contact directly in person. Improvements in communication and outreach simply require better planning and foresight on my part. The shortcoming here is mine alone.

VII. Concluding remarks

The requirement for students to purchase Super Eigo was dropped before the start of the 2015-16 academic year (the survey in this report was conducted a few months prior). The decision was made by programme leadership due to top-down pressure from higher up in the university management hierarchy. It was reported that this top-down pressure resulted from student complaints; however, this is merely
Coordinating web-based language study: a management policy report

anecdotal and without data for complaint numbers or specific nature of the issues put forward. In any case, the fact remains that the decision to drop Super Eigo as common teaching material was not a curriculum decision made by the English Section. Abandoning the only common teaching material in the curriculum was not subject to discussion or debate and was met with no objections or resistance. The ease with which Super Eigo was abandoned as common teaching material is further indication of the academic management issues addressed in this report. Perhaps a coordinated curriculum that works would not be so ephemeral.

Next, it is important to consider these issues in the context of the curriculum as a whole. To start, English Section courses are defined by brief thematic descriptions for each distinct course title. Fundamentally, the English Section curriculum is applied along the principle of academic freedom accorded to academic subjects. That is, instructors are entrusted with teaching a unique syllabus to fit each course according to the instructor’s own expertise and areas of interest. In the course catalogue the thematic descriptions for each course category are listed identically for all course sections. This may appear to indicate uniformity across the different sections; however, in practice the sections of a course are totally unique by instructor. Compounding the distinctions, for each section of a course, students are grouped based on their major and placement-test score; consequently, individual instructors may also have modified or distinct syllabi for different sections of the same-named course according to the major or rank level of the students (e.g. Physical Education “C” vs. Medical “A”). This means that not only are all courses unique by instructor, but also sections of a same-named course taught by a single instructor may differ. At present, there are no coordinated common teaching materials in any ES course. Additionally, no ES course is related in scope, level, grading criteria, course expectations, workload or student learning outcomes. We can add to this that for all courses the “I, II” series does not indicate sequence, only course length AB (I) 8 weeks (+2 independent study), or ABC (II) 15 weeks.

The success of such a system is driven by the academic integrity and expertise of the faculty. The strengths of treating the ES curriculum as teaching an academic subject includes the diversity of approaches from different instructors, as well as the opportunity for creativity and experimentation for each faculty member. The merits of this system deserve greater attention, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

It must be noted that, since the core identity of the English Section curriculum is aligned to teaching English as an academic subject, this is to be distinguished from teaching English for language learning, whether that be language learning for 1. language acquisition (e.g. for communication in the language), or language learning for 2. testing (e.g. university entrance exams, TOEFL).

The point is that it is inherently problematic to try to introduce any concept or practice of “coordination”, such as with Super Eigo, into a curriculum whose core identity is the academic freedom of teaching an academic subject. Before “coordination”, first the case would have to be argued for the English Section
curriculum to be restructured according to a principle of “teaching a language” rather than the principle of “teaching an academic subject”. Clarification of the core identity and purpose of the curriculum is prerequisite to any discussion of course coordination or any attempt to implement common teaching materials.

This is not to say that much instruction geared towards language instruction does not occur, nor that voluntary cooperation is impossible. Currently, many instructors in the English Section take as their primary duty specifically the instruction of language acquisition. But this is accommodated by the broad charge of a core identity of academic freedom for academic subjects. A truly coordinated curriculum would signify redefining the program in terms of a core identity oriented fundamentally and in total to language acquisition. This would mean thereby a paradigm change to a calculated program of study that is coordinated, planned and rooted in specific learning outcomes, whether they are for communication or testing. Such a transformation would herald a quantum shift in the identity and root principles of the teaching project of the English Section at the University of Tsukuba. This paper makes no claim for or against this proposition. The current program undoubtedly has its merits, while nominal change for change’s sake may be inconsequential. Suffice to say that if student achievement and learning outcomes align with top-down university policy initiatives, then at the English Section level a coordinated curriculum or common teaching materials requires careful strategic planning: organisational management must be prioritized to ensure effective educational systems.

Finally, it is important to point out that challenges in academic management are pervasive in tertiary education worldwide. Moreover, many of the issues addressed in this report are reflective of standard practices throughout the University of Tsukuba. It is understood that historic management practices – university-wide and at all levels of operations – are likely to differ in organisational culture from that of the quality assurance principles being adopted in university reform. In part this is because, as Keio University Professor Ueyama Takehiro has pointed out, the shift at national universities to a knowledge-based university model happened abruptly in the last decade. In that rapid shift the historic foundation of university administration has tended to remain in place while only adopting the nomenclature and surface appearance of reform models and practices. University professionals, by omission or by objection, have tended to remain untouched and unchanged by top-down reform measures. In alignment with the “University of Tsukuba Strategy for Internationalization”, this report may contribute to helping formulate recommendations for organisational management and best practices in the internationalisation processes of the University of Tsukuba.

References


Appendix

Survey contents

Page 1
Research consent form

You are invited to participate in a research project that we are planning. The project is investigating student perceptions of using Super Eigo to learn English.

*The data for this project will be collected electronically using an online survey.

Please note:
- Participation is voluntary.
- You may withdraw from this research at any time.
- You do not need to give your name, and the data that you provide is anonymous.

The data will only be used for this research project and it is confidential.

Thank you for your help!

リサーチ協力のお願い。

このリサーチは、スーパー英語で英語の勉強をするかどのように感じているかを調べるためのものです。このリサーチでは、オンラインアンケートを利用してデータを収集します。

リサーチへの参加は任意です。

リサーチの途中であっても、いつでも退席可能です。

記名の必要はなく、提供いただいたデータは匿名で集計されます。

提供いただいたデータは機密情報として、リサーチプロジェクトでの利用目的にのみ使用します。
Page 2
1. 年齢 Age

2. 性別 Sex
男 Male
女 Female

3. クラス Class level

4. 教員名 Course instructor
5. 時限 Student year

Page 3
1. I use Super Eigo.
私はスーパー英語を使った。

Page 4
1. 私はスーパー英語が好きだ。
I like Super Eigo.
はい Yes
いいえ No

2. あなたは毎週スーパー英語に何時間をしましたか？
How many minutes did you spend

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3. スーパー英語は英語を学ぶのに良い手段だと思う。
Super Eigo is a good way
to learn English.

4. スーパー英語は私の英語の助けになった。
Super Eigo helped me with
my English.

5. スーパー英語を友達にすすめます。
I recommend Super Eigo to my
friends.

6. 私がスーパー英語を使った主な理由は...
I used Super Eigo mainly because ...

クラスで必修だったから。It was required.
英語力向上のため。To improve my English.
楽しかったから。It was fun.
7. 今までのマイル数を教えて下さい。
Enter your total Super Eigo miles to date.

8. スーパー英語は価段の割に得な買い物だった。
Super Eigo was good value for the price.

Page 5
1. TOEFL はにとって重要である。
TOEFL is important to me.

Page 6
1. TOEFL スコアを改善すると思う。
Super Eigo will help me improve my TOEFL score.

2. あなたは何回 TOEFL テストを受けましたか？
How many times have you taken the TOEFL test?

3. TOEFL 最高得点は... TOEFL highest score...

4. 私は TOEFL テストを受けるつもりです。
I will take the TOEFL test...

5. 私は TOEFL のために猛勉強した
I study hard for TOEFL.

6. Comment

*The pilot study and survey questions were developed as a collaborative project by English section instructors G. Black, R. Ide and M. Tasseron based on an earlier survey design from G. Black. The idea to use “Survey Monkey” as the tool to implement the survey, and the text used for the consent form came from M. Tasseron. The Japanese language edit checks and the idea to expand the respondents set by inviting other instructors to participate came from R. Ide. Set-up
and administration of the survey was conducted by G. Black. G. Black is the sole author of this paper; all errors or omissions are his responsibility alone.