

MOTIVATION AND INTAKE: CREATING ENGLISH EARNERS THROUGH A CYCLICAL BLENDED-LEARNING MODEL

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Abstract

The authors have been involved in the development of a two-year blended-learning course for engineering students at a Japanese university. Freshmen entering this program are typically false beginners in English with very poor motivation. Due to a lack of knowledge, skill, and motivation, these students are unable to self-regulate their study and need positive external motivators. Therefore, this course is designed to enhance the face-to-face (F2F) time with the students and emphasizes the teacher roles such as “trainer,” “motivator,” and “mentor.” The first year of the program aims to motivate the students to become autonomous English learners and develop their comprehension through intake. The second year continues this focus while also endeavoring to enhance students’ willingness to communicate and improve their attitudes toward learning English. This presentation analyzes the effects of this course on student motivation and language aptitude. Specifically, it will discuss the impact of a cyclical blended-learning model that prioritizes and attempts to maximize the effectiveness of F2F time with the students. The data consists of multiple CASEC tests and questionnaire responses.

1 Introduction

Over the past four and a half years, robotics engineering majors have been taking a unique blended-learning curriculum at Chubu University in Japan. The curriculum is administered over two years and utilizes a cyclical blending method with a focus placed on the face-to-face (F2F) class time with the students. The overall goal of the curriculum is to turn students, who typically enter the program with very low English language proficiency and very poor motivation to learn, into autonomous English learners. This study aims to explain the course and give an accounting of the impact it has had on students in it.

1.1.1 Students in the course

Students in the course typically enter with very low motivation or confidence to learn English. While most express a desire to speak English, they do not feel that they are capable of learning the language due to previous experiences in English classes (Oguri, Allen, & Kato, 2016). Some students entering the course are even unwilling to communicate or interact with their peers much in their native language. Thus, learning to communicate in a foreign language is a daunting task for them. As such, it was no surprise that the freshmen entering the curriculum in 2017 overwhelmingly stated that they did not believe they were good at learning English. A few even indicated that they disliked or hated English. Only 22% of students (n = 81) had positive feelings toward English language learning (see figure 1). The majority of the students indicated that they had held these feeling since junior high school, when most began their English education. In short, the students are unable to self-regulate when it comes to English language learning, and are in need of positive external motivators.

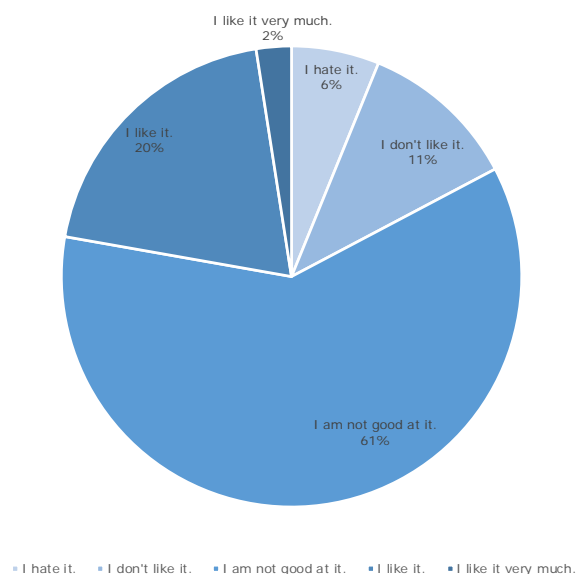


Fig. 1. 2017 Freshman feelings toward Learning English

2. Curriculum Design

Due to the fact that most students enter the program with these negative views of English, a curriculum had to be designed with the goal of helping students overcome their anxiety and building their confidence during the first year. The students also needed to develop a willingness to communicate in English. Finally, it was imperative to create a curriculum that would also teach students how to cultivate good language study habits that students could continue on their own so that they could learn autonomously. These goals also had to be achieved within the limits of meeting the students face-to-face for only 90 minutes a week.

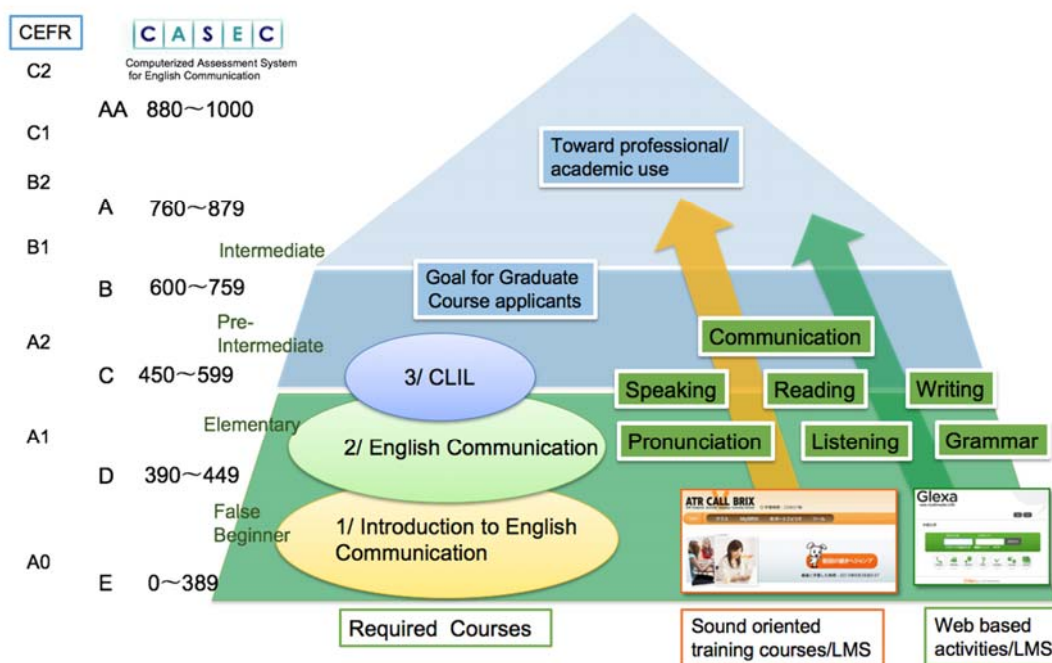


Fig. 2. Curriculum design for robotics majors

The result of these demands was a blended-learning curriculum where the first 2 years focused on using an e-learning components to enhance the limited face-to-face time instructors have with the students with the goal of preparing students for their content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classes in the third year (see figure 2 above). In the freshman year, students are collaboratively taught in a 90 or 180-minute sessions once a week. They are given instruction in how to recognize and produce the basic sounds of English to help enhance their listening confidence. In addition, students are required to learn how to study English on their own through guided practice with a learning management system (LMS) called Glaxa and an online program for building vocabulary, listening, and speaking called ATR CALL Brix. This priority focus on listening and pronunciation training helps build the receptive understanding the language with the goal of increasing their ability to fluently produce it. As they find success in this process, the students' confidence gradually grows along with their communicative ability and willingness. In short, the first year of the curriculum aims to instill students with a sense of learning autonomy and strengthen their English skills primarily through intake.

The second year of the program continues much of the curriculum of the first year, but focuses more on enhancing students' overall communicative ability. In the second-year students are broken into 4 different classes based upon CASEC test scores and teacher observations and opinions. Each class is taught once a week for 90 minutes sessions that are split into two 45-minute sessions between a Japanese native teacher (JNT) and an English native teacher (ENT). The JNT teaches a very task-oriented class that helps to further build the receptive skills of the students. On the other hand, the ENT runs a 45-minute production workshop designed to get the students comfortable with producing the language in natural and authentic ways.

2.1 Cyclical Blending

On the surface, the course looks similar to other blended-learning courses, where an e-component is combined with F2F time with the students. However, the method of blending developed for the first two years of the curriculum is a method the authors have coined as cyclical blended learning. In cyclical blending, materials are created on an LMS (in this case Glexa) where students are encouraged to engage in self-regulated learning (SRL). These SRL activities are derived from the F2F activities that the students have already practiced, and are modified or expanded to add more to the students' knowledge or practice. These SRL activities then scaffold into the next F2F lesson, which spiral once again back to Glexa. The blend is then woven into classes for the next week, where the spiral of F2F and SRL repeats (figure 3 below).

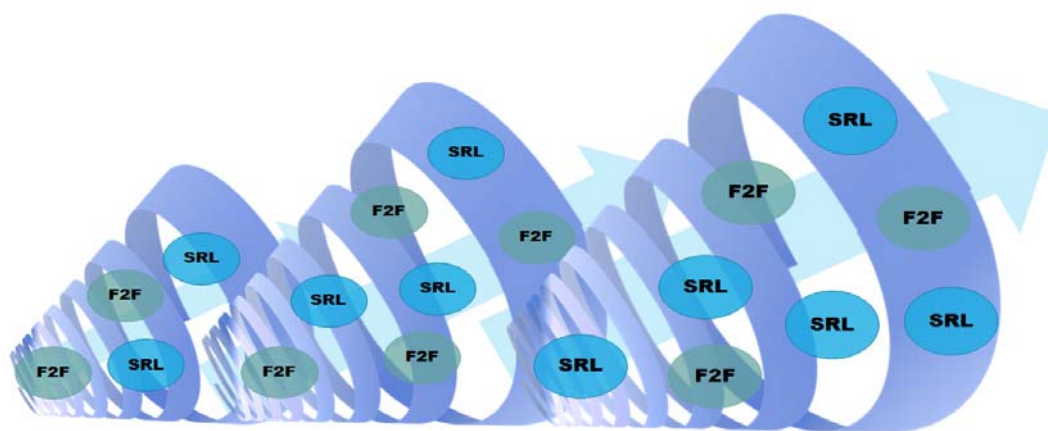


Fig. 3. Cyclical blending

Nearly every aspect of the course runs in a cycle. For example, materials are developed in a similar cycle of activity, where they are analyzed, organized, adapted, presented, reviewed, and then analyzed once more. In fact, the entire premise of the method is based on a cycle of input, practice, output, and intake. In this way, students are given incremental English growth that is constantly reviewed and scaffolded into the next activity or lesson.

3. Effects of cyclical blending

In general the curriculum has had positive results over the course of the past 4 years. Students in each year have generally increased in both their attitudes toward English learning and their overall proficiency with the language. To measure this progress of the students, a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data has been collected and analyzed. The quantitative data consists of multiple standardized CASEC test scores administered up to twice a year. The qualitative data is in the form of multiple questionnaires given to the students before and after treatment. The details of each will be discussed in the sections below.

3.1.1 Effects on language aptitude

Overall, there has been a net increase in language acquisition for every class that has been run through the program. Due to this consistency, it can be assumed that the current treatment is

effective at increasing student language aptitude. Since there are too many tests that have been administered over the years to cover in a single short analysis, this study will focus on a few representative samples.

The first sample is the overall CASEC scores from years 2014 to years 2017 for the students that began the program in April, 2014 and graduated in March, 2018.

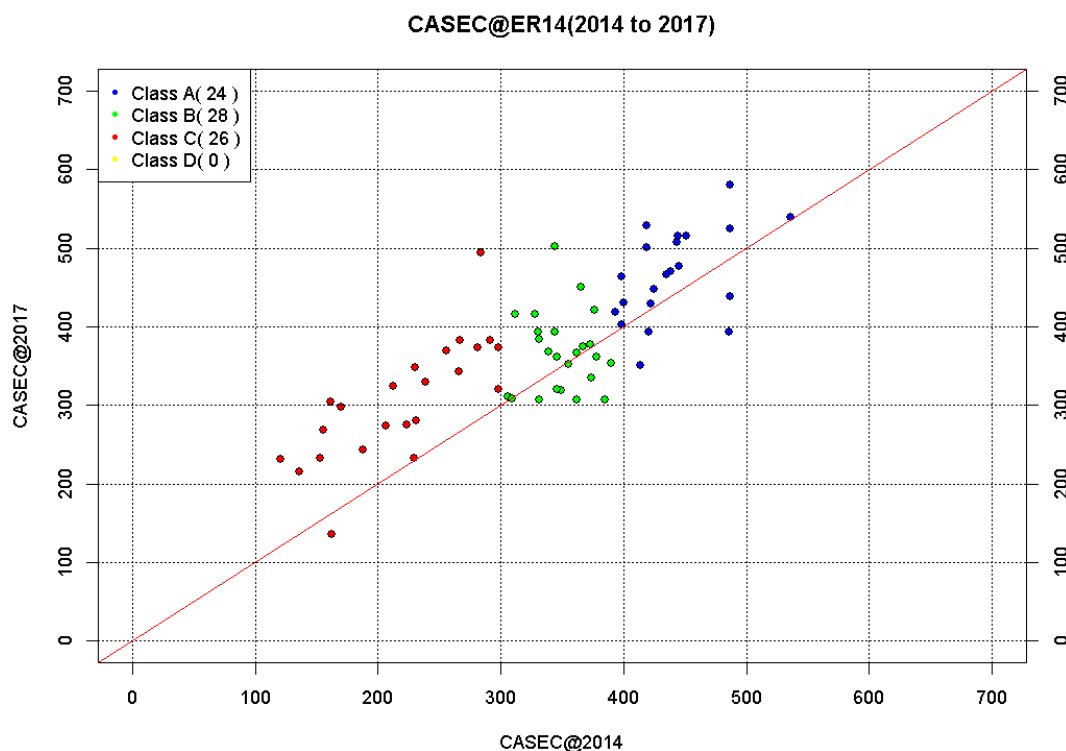


Fig. 4. CASEC scores for students over 3 years (2014-2017)

In Figure 4 above, the line that runs diagonally from 0 to above 700 is the base-line and represents the scores of the students on the initial CASEC test administered in April, 2014. Each dot represents a student. The color of the dots represents which class the student belongs to, A being the highest level class and C being the lowest. The distance between the base-line and the dots is the amount of progression or regression in their CASEC scores between 2014 and 2017. As can be seen, the majority of students increased their CASEC score over 3 years of the curriculum. This is especially true for students that began with lower English language skills, which is consistent with the natural progression of learning; increases are faster and more prominent at lower levels of proficiency. However, increases are also seen at the upper level, where progression is typically more gradual and difficult. Based on these results, it can be confidently asserted that the blended-learning curriculum was successful in helping the 2014 class students increase their English language proficiency. One class, however, does not make or break a program.

The next graph shows the results over two years for the class of 2016-2018. This graph was chosen as a mid-point for the four years the program has been in effect. As can be seen in figure

5 below, the same trend holds for the class of 2016 as was true for the class of 2014 (this can be said for 2015 as well).

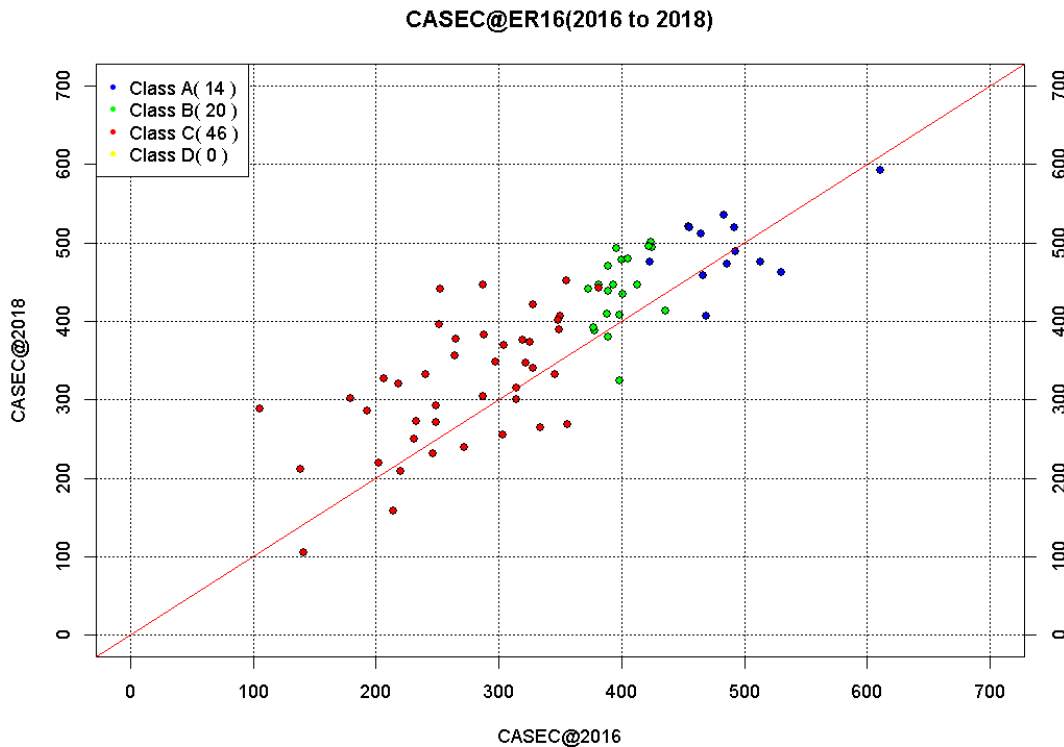


Fig. 5. CASEC scores for students over 2 years (2016-2018)

In general, the class of 2016 had a very similar trajectory to the class of 2014, though there were fewer gains at the highest levels. Still, the overall progression has been that of students increasing their English language aptitude by a significant margin over the course of the treatment. After three consecutive years of similar growth of students at all levels in terms of language aptitude, it was expected that the class of 2017 would follow a similar pattern. This seemed to be the case at first, but something unexpected happened in 2018.

Although the lower levels of the students in the class of 2017 have shown a very similar progression to the lower aptitude students in the previous years of this curriculum, the higher level students have not shown much improvement overall. As can be seen in figure 6 below, the majority of students still benefit from the treatment they are given. However, students beyond the 400 level of CASEC scores seem to be struggling when it comes to increasing their English language skills.

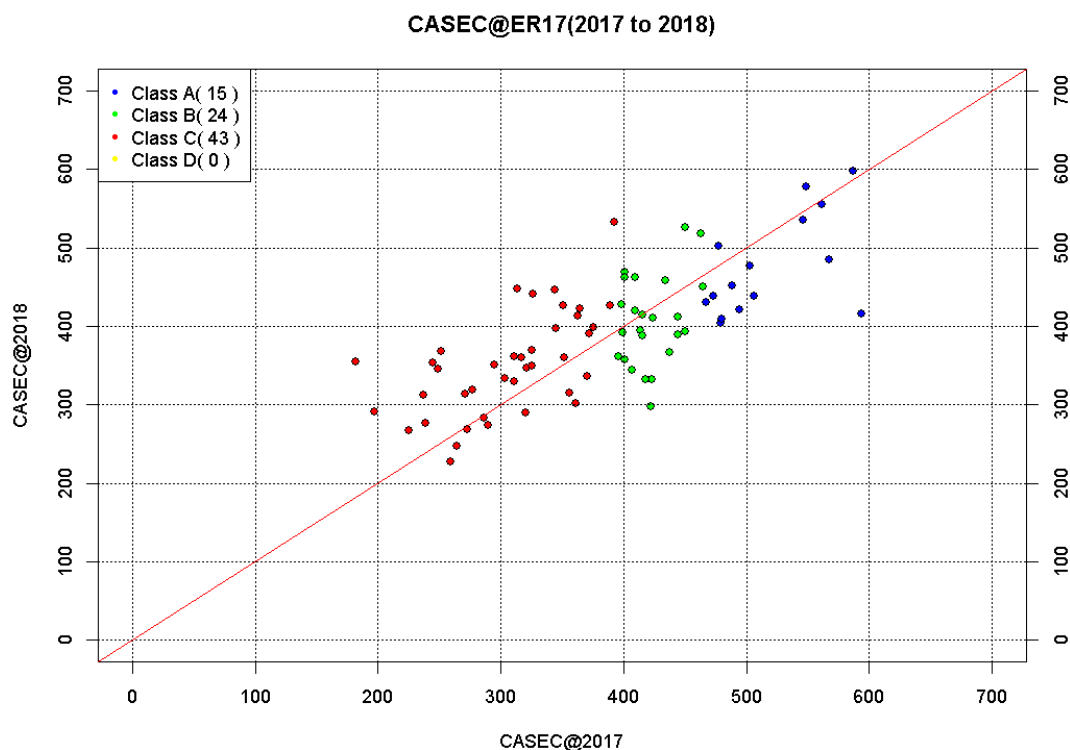


Fig. 6. CASEC scores for students over 1 year (2017-2018)

The reasons for this change between this class and previous classes is, as of yet, unclear. One possibility is that this measurement comes before the complement of the treatment, and that students may show gains when they are tested again at the end of the current semester. However, the pattern still does not match previous classes at this point in their development. For example, the previous class (the class of 2016), had a pattern after only one year of treatment that closely mirrored the pattern in the two-year total for this class from figure 5. Therefore it can be assumed that the discrepancy is not due to the timing of the CASEC test. It is hoped that a program exit questionnaire on motivation will help root out the cause. Recent in-class observation seems to suggest that the current students are simply less interested in applying themselves during lessons than previous years.

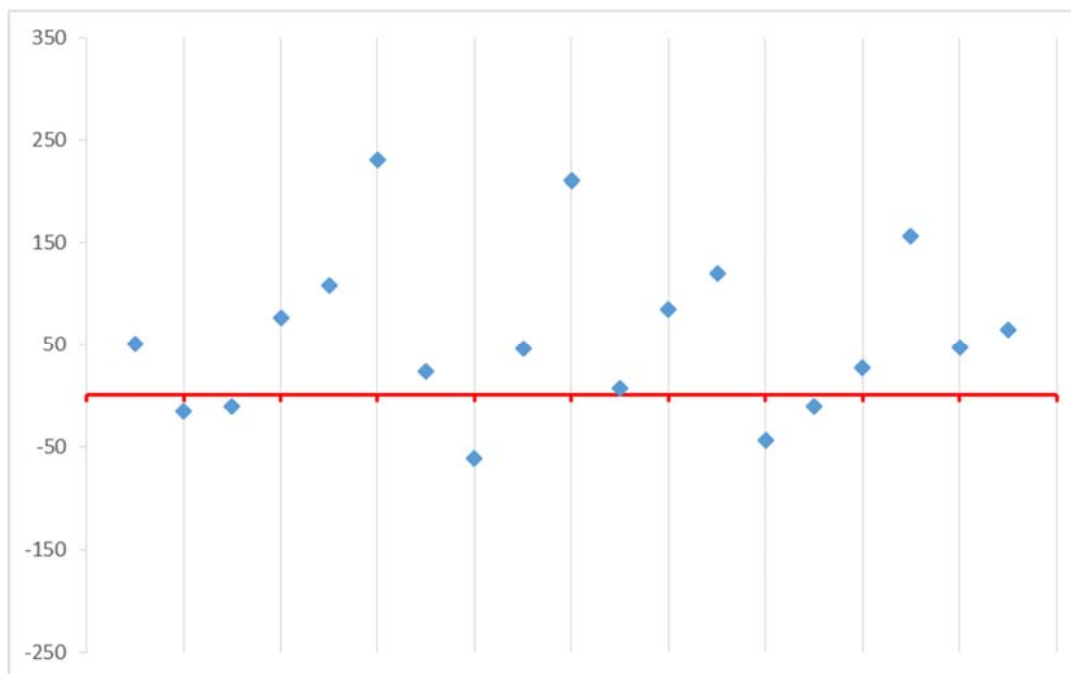


Fig. 7. Comparison of CASEC test scores for 2014 students now in graduate program

Perhaps the most interesting data observed from the CASEC testing is the results of the 2018 graduate program students (who all entered the robotics engineering program in 2014 as freshmen). These students spent their senior year (2017) without required English education through the current curriculum. Despite having one and a half years of no required English instruction, most of the students retained the gains they made between 2014 and 2017, though some regression over the off-year was observed. The scatter plot in figure 7 shows the difference in CASEC scores between the initial placement test they took in the spring of 2014 and the placement CASEC test they took when entering the graduate program in the spring of 2018. As can be seen, 14 of the 19 students maintained an improvement over their initial score, though 5 students did seem to regress below the level at which they began studying at the university. For many of the students this loss came during the year in which they had no mandatory English classes. From these results, it can be assumed that many of the students continued to learn or acquire English autonomously during the 18 months without mandatory English education.

3.2 Effects on learner motivation

Motivation is far more difficult to measure than language acquisition. Like many studies on motivation, this data was collected based on student self-reporting in multiple surveys and questionnaires given to the students over the four years of this program. The questions were asked in the students' native language (Japanese) so as to mitigate possible misunderstandings derived from language barriers. The responses have been translated to English for the purpose of this study.

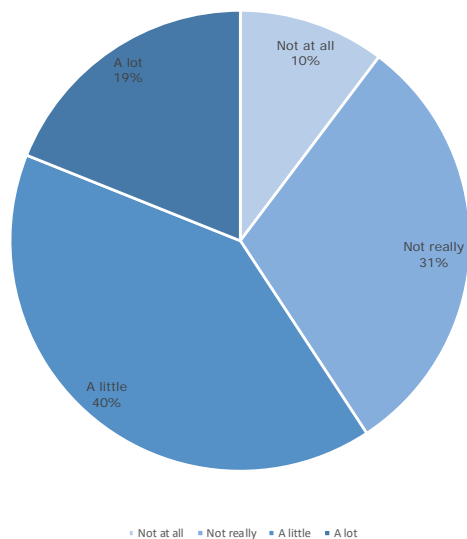


Fig. 8 Feelings before university about English use for classes 2014-2016

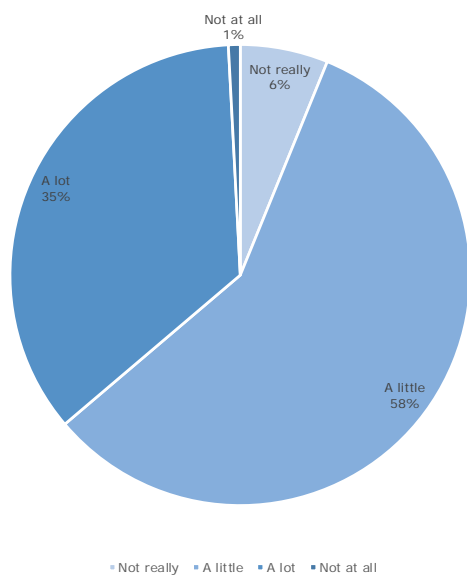


Fig. 9. Current feelings about English use for classes 2014-2016

Overall, most classes have indicated a change in attitude in their desire to use English since they enrolled in the curriculum. Figure 8 shows students' initial attitudes toward their desire to pursue English before they entered university. In general most of the students did want to be able to use English, however, there was still a significant percentage (41%) that did not desire to use English. After being in the program for at least a semester, these attitudes changed significantly. Students overwhelmingly felt a desire to use English either a little (58%) or a lot (35%) while only 7% of students still had little to no motivation to use English. This change

can be seen in figure 9. These findings match previous surveys asking about changes in attitude toward English learning asked in 2016 (Oguri, Allen, Kato, 2016).

The 2014 students who have continued their studies in the graduate program were also asked to once again describe their feelings toward their improvement in English proficiency and their motivation to continue their English studies. The reason for this survey was to see if the students felt they had retained their English and whether or not they were still motivated to continue learning. The results can be seen in figure 10 and figure 11.

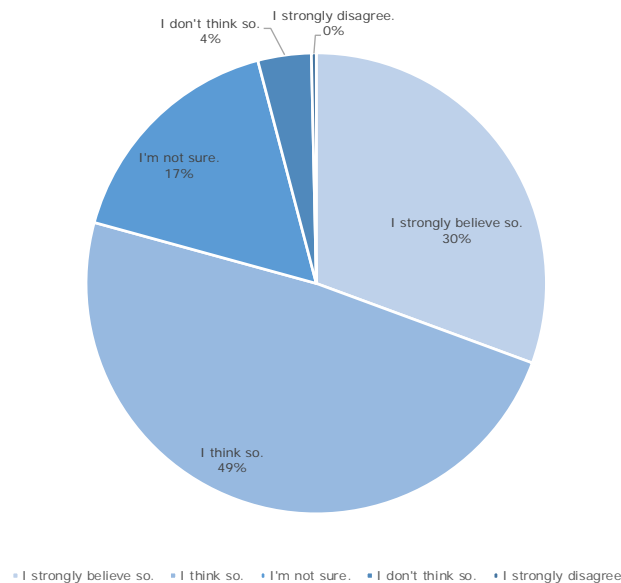


Fig. 10. Reported feelings of improvement in 7 targeted areas of English

As can be seen in figure 10, the combined responses of current graduate students that continued from the class of 2014 were confident that they had improvement in the seven areas of English language that were prominently targeted during the cyclical blended learning curriculum they took in 2014 and 2015: pronunciation (word and sentence), listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. While this is self-reported, it does seem to accurately support the results of the CASEC test scores for these students.

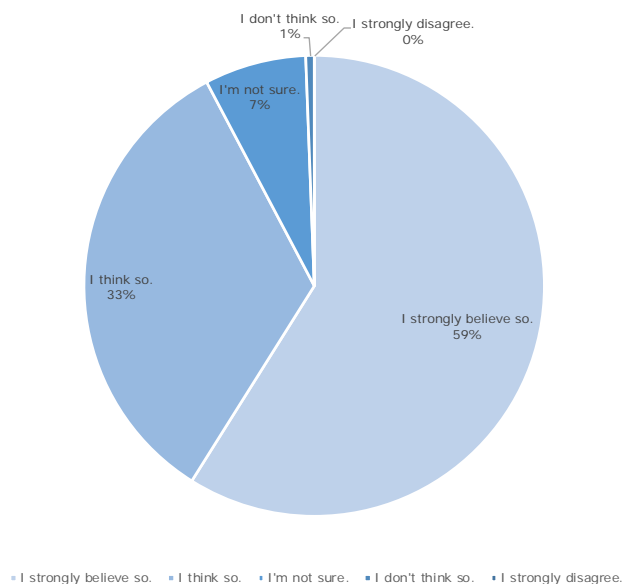


Fig. 11. Reported desire to improve in 7 targeted areas of English

Figure 11 shows the desire of graduate students to continue studying or improving their English across the same 7 attributes of English language that were measure in figure 10 above. The results suggest that the students have maintained enough motivation to continue their English studies, which is quite impressive considering that the majority of these students initially stated that they did not like learning English when they entered university in 2014. These findings also strongly suggest that most of these students have become autonomous English learners.

4. Conclusion

The three main goals of the curriculum are a) reduce negative images and attitudes toward learning English, help learners grow beyond the level of “false beginner” to be prepared for CLIL classes, and c) help students begin developing autonomy. In general, the cyclically blended curriculum has had positive outcomes for most students that have entered the program in regard to these goals. Including the least successful class of 2017, a majority of students have found gains in the language acquisition and most students have moved beyond the “false beginner” level. Overall negative attitudes toward English have also reduced for each year of classes thus far. Also, responses from students that have already exited the curriculum have strongly indicated an increase in motivation to use or learn English. Moreover, the responses from current students in the graduate program suggest that gains made by the students during the first two years of the curriculum are retained in the long-term, serving as a possible indication that students are continuing to study or practice English autonomously.

Although the results over the past 4 years have been mostly positive, there are limitations to this method of instruction. One is that the method requires a lot of buy-in by the various instructors; like many co-teaching curriculums, teachers need to be open with their lesson plans, materials, methods, and even classrooms, which can expose their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012). This approach also heavily relies on the use of a dynamic and highly customizable LMS for the material development cycle (Oguri, Allen, Kato, 2017). Many such LMS platforms require the purchase of a server, license or both. This places limits

on the accessibility of the method for schools with limited resources. Moodle is a possible free alternative, but it is far less user-friendly and would require much more work in terms of material development and adaptation. Moreover, the current curriculum is focused on a specific type of student: engineering students in a Japanese university with little motivation to study English. Although the current research has more than 4 years of data, the general student archetype has remained constant. It is unclear how effective this program would be for students in the humanities or other sciences as these concerns are beyond the scope of this project. The curriculum would certainly need to be adapted to better address the needs of such students.

Despite these limitations, it appears that cyclical blended-learning can help create long-term, autonomous English learners. This may be due to the cyclical nature of the blending in which tasks, lessons, and even yearly content is connected through cycles of F2F and SRL reinforcement. This reinforcement helps to compensate for the limited F2F time instructors have with the students. Finally, it is hoped that this method leads to both a more enjoyable and better quality learning for the students in the course.

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