

## The English Language Program : An Overview

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### 1. Introduction

The English Language Program (ELP) at J. F. Oberlin University was created and staffed to deliver English courses to undergraduate students at the university. Over the past 15 years, it has implemented English courses for all undergraduate students enrolled in the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business Management, Performing and Visual Arts, and Health and Welfare, most notably through the first-year required Core English I and II courses. It has also implemented a variety of other courses and auxiliary programs which have enriched the university experience for students and staff. These courses and programs are detailed below.

However, first it is important to note that these programs have not been implemented arbitrarily, nor have they they appeared spontaneously and fully-formed. Rather, each one was carefully planned and designed, and continues to be re-evaluated and improved each year by a motivated team of full-time faculty and staff. Over the years, the ELP team has developed a deep and valuable institutional expertise in designing, implementing, and managing not only the large-scale English Core curriculum, but also all of the other components that contribute to a successful language program.

The ELP has also been remarkably successful in meeting university targets; for example, when the university implemented its recent directive to control for grade inflation, the ELP quickly instituted grading guidelines to meet the new targets, and—despite its relatively large size—achieved better and quicker results than most other departments. Indeed, it is not unusual for part-time and visiting teachers to comment that the ELP appears to be an exceptionally well-managed and effective program when compared to other general English departments throughout Japan.

Therefore, given the current context of changes to the university's college system, it may be useful to consider the variety of effective programs which have been designed and implemented by the ELP, and whether these risk being lost under a radical reorganization.

## 2. ELP Courses

### 2.1 Core English

Delivering Core English courses has been the main task of the ELP in recent years. There are four Core English courses, two per semester. These are divided into 'A' and 'B' sections; *Listening & Speaking* and *Reading & Writing*, respectively. Core IA and IB courses are offered in the spring, and Core IIA and IIB are offered in the fall. Furthermore, there are three language proficiency levels into which students are streamed by entrance placement test scores.

Core English courses are delivered to about 2,000 students per year, who are placed into 92 classes clustered by student faculty enrollment. These classes are, in turn, taught by about 80 full-time and part-time instructors. All full-time ELP faculty and staff are, in various capacities, closely involved in the administration of the Core English processes, from scheduling and training part-time teachers, to student placement, to managing the implementation of the curriculum, to ensuring consistency in grading, and more.

The continuing goal of Core English has been to implement a standardised and level-appropriate year of English to students who, for the most part, are not English majors. Given this, the curriculum recognizes that most first-year students are not highly motivated to study English; nevertheless, it attempts to create an atmosphere wherein the courses can be made achievable, practical, and communicative in accordance with Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology (MEXT) national guidelines.

With these objectives, it is important to maintain a high standard of inter-faculty reliability in both teaching and assessment. This is achieved by paying close attention to curriculum design, development, and implementation, as well as textbook and materials selection, ongoing faculty development, and a holistic grading policy.

Starting in 2013, the Core English curriculum was completely redesigned to better meet the changing needs of students and the university. Over a period of three years, curriculum teams for both A and B courses implemented needs analyses of teachers and students; researched and selected from a variety of possible textbooks and other resources; developed a complete syllabus and supporting materials; designed, wrote and trialed assessment materials; developed a comprehensive set of custom-made language descriptor systems and can-do statements; and delivered a range of faculty development sessions to train teachers in the new curriculum.

## **2.2 Other Courses**

The ELP's responsibilities have included not only Core English, but also a range of other courses, including English Electives, the English Passport Course, Study Abroad, and BM-TOEIC. These are designed and managed under the umbrella of the ELP, often in collaboration with other colleges or departments.

### **2.2.1 Electives**

In 2014, the ELP Electives program offered a variety of courses designed to meet the needs and interests of students as well as the curriculum requirements of the colleges. Forty-three classes were offered in the spring and fifty-seven classes in the fall, for a total of one hundred classes for the academic year. Over the past two years, the ELP Electives team, with the help of other College of Cornerstone Education staff, has also implemented complex administrative changes to the course numbering and naming system, and created an ELP Level Check test for more effective placement of students.

Unlike Core English courses, each Electives course is unique, which creates particular challenges to smooth implementation. Whereas other institutions often leave instructors to individually deal with syllabus input, textbook selection, student management, final grading, etc., one of the important duties of the ELP has been to bring a level of balance and consistency to the administration of its courses. Furthermore, this process is constantly being reviewed and, when necessary, improved. For example, in 2014 the system of syllabus submission and input was greatly streamlined by creating standardised Google Forms templates for teachers to use, which are then individually checked by the ELP faculty before they are uploaded by the teacher. This has led to fewer issues of incorrect information being input into the e-Campus system.

### **2.2.2 BM TOEIC, English Passport, Study Abroad**

In 2014, the ELP was tasked with implementing three new series of courses. Small teams were assigned to each task, and they employed expertise derived from the operation of the ELP's other activities to design and successfully implement these new courses as well. Tasks included, among other challenges, new curriculum development, scheduling, textbook selection, and the hiring and training of new teachers.

The first and largest of these new courses are the new TOEIC classes, designed to meet the needs of the College of Business Management. The ELP now runs 33 BM-TOEIC classes, and also administers the TOEIC IP test. Also in 2014, the ELP implemented the new English Passport Course (EPC) with the goal of accelerating students' English ability and study

skills, and to increase student involvement in study abroad programs. The EPC has been successful in this goal, sending a majority of its first EPC cohort abroad in 2015. Finally, 2014 also saw the design and implementation of a new Study Abroad course which prepares students for short-term study abroad programs. Four full-time ELP faculty are currently involved in running seminars and assessing coursework for this new program.

### 3. Auxiliary Programs and Activities

Several auxiliary programs and activities have also been successfully added to the ELP's portfolio over the years, including the Foreign Language Study Center (FLSC), the Writing Support Center (WSC), the Shansi Fellows program, the ELP Microconference, [elpweb.com](http://elpweb.com), the ELP Student Handbook, the ELP Lecture Series, and the English Presentation Contest.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe these initiatives in detail, but they can best be categorized as *Faculty Support*, *Student Support*, and *Institutional Support* activities. *Faculty Support* includes a variety of teacher development and training activities—for example, the ELP Microconference—which serve to enhance our teachers' practical skills as well as increase staff motivation. *Student Support* activities includes the FLSC, the WSC, and the new English Presentation Contest, among others, and are designed primarily to support student achievement. Other *Institutional Support* initiatives are those which have an impact outside the department, and even on the university as a whole. The ELP Lecture Series, [elpweb.com](http://elpweb.com), and the ELP Student Handbook, for example, all contribute in a positive way to the overall success and perception of the university and of the ELP within the greater community.

There is overlap between many of these auxiliary activities. For example, the ELP Lecture Series is not only a showcase of faculty interests to the greater community, but it also provides a venue for student learning and for faculty development. Likewise, the Student Handbook is both a resource for students and a tangible document highlighting many of the activities of the ELP to outside parties; for example, to parents and to prospective students.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It is important to note that ELP programs and objectives have evolved slowly over time, leading to the carefully balanced portfolio of initiatives that exists now. Outside change has always been part of the equation, but this has also been managed by a team of motivated and engaged full-time faculty members who were committed to—and respected by—the university. It is no small thing to steer a large-scale curriculum; much less to also ensure consistency in grading, provide a high quality standard of instruction, coordinate dozens of part-time instructors, and support a myriad of university initiatives in a constantly changing environment. That the ELP has managed to effectively balance these and other challenges—while simultaneously maintaining student achievement at acceptable levels, redesigning the Core curriculum, implementing several new courses, and adding to its feature list of auxiliary activities—speaks well to the efficacy of the ELP's current organizational structure.

On the whole, the achievements of the ELP over the years have been incremental, and are dependent upon the continuity provided by a core team of experienced and committed staff. The ELP has become an efficient and well-run department, with a proven ability to meet university directives, and possessed of valuable institutional memory. It would be wise to remember that these achievements can be difficult—and costly—to replicate once they are lost.