

# The Ongoing Development of the Small Class English Program

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## Abstract

Since its inception in 2004 the Small Class English Program (SEP) has undergone numerous and significant developments. This article details these developments and their impact on learning English for academic and professional purposes in Kawasaki Medical School.

Based on observations gained in the relatively new role of SEP Coordinator (Tokunin-Koshi), the author highlights current SEP courses and the benefits of small group learning. Furthermore, the article documents the coordination of a large and culturally diverse part-time teaching team, its positive impact on the SEP and the management challenges it presents.

Lastly, key to the successful development of any educational project is the need for clear short-term goals and a shared long-term vision. In doing so, this article identifies 3 main areas of research to empower the future direction of a successful Small Class English Program, 1), conducting systematic needs analysis for medical English content on the program, 2), researching benefits of homogenous and heterogeneous groups lessons and, 3), incorporating cultural richness whilst maintaining parity of service and language development.

**Key words:** ESP-English for Specific Purposes, small groups, coordination, health, ESL, multilevel, the SEP.

## 1 . Introduction. ( History of SEP )

Starting in 2004 the Foreign Languages Department Professor identified a need to establish English language learning in small groups, with the aim of fostering supportive learning environments for practical communication.

In 2008 a new full-time teacher became the SEP team leader. Then the teaching team consisted of 6 staff. Six courses offering a choice

of subjects were available at the second grade level of the program separated by difficulty and course topic. However, a disparity amongst the consequent learning experiences and differing methods of assessment led to negative feedback from the students regarding topic relevancy issues and assessment inequalities (Rapley 2010).

To remedy this, a public speaking course was introduced requiring all teachers to work in unison, following the same curriculum plans and

assessment methods. Public speaking in English was identified as filling a useful skills gap amongst the students, and aside from it not being offered in 2010 when Kawasaki's foreign language focus shifted to writing, it resumed in 2011 and continues to run to this present day.

The next significant development was the expansion of the SEP and the acquisition of a further 5 part-time educators to teach a medical English communication course to the third grade students. After one academic year the SEP was then further expanded to include first and second graders. Thus, the part-time teaching team grew to 17 members in total who began teaching across three days a week. Prior to the implementation of the new courses and the subsequent expansion of the part-time teaching team the SEP team leader vacated their position to pursue another career in their home country. Initially this substantial change in personnel had an adverse affect on the successful implementation of this phase of the SEP program.

Subsequently, the program leader, Professor Shibata, focused on providing students with the medical English necessary for understanding and contributing to medical journals and research in a large class setting. In addition to this, he was then tasked with overseeing the coordination of the SEP's three courses. In order to assist with the smooth implementation of the SEP courses a temporary coordinator was selected from the existing part-time teaching staff based upon their constructive contributions to the SEP.

As the person in that role, over the period of

the remaining two terms I implemented initial changes to add stability and clarity to the SEP. Foremost amongst these changes was ensuring the large teaching team was unified to teach from the same page and provide students with equal in-lesson experiences, practical assessments and end of term exams. However, the limited time afforded to the temporary role did not provide enough opportunities for effective evaluation and coordination. Hence, from 2012 onward the temporary Coordinator role changed to 3 full days a week in the position of Tokunin-Koshi. This is the position I now currently occupy as the leader of the SEP.

## 2 . SEP: SMALL GROUP TEACHING

Currently SEP offers 3 English courses to the first, second and third grade students. Each course is both theoretical and practical and offers opportunities for different teaching approaches and learning experiences in small groups. The overall structure of the courses is as follows:

- The first grade students explore topical health and medical issues. Throughout the course students develop their listening skills and raise their vocabulary levels in order to contribute meaningfully in discussions, role-plays, debates, opinion giving and assessed presentations. The content of the course is based on global health issues that are relevant to the students' personal lives and future professions.
- The second grade students acquire essential presentation skills and are guided in giving presentations in English, with the end goal of proficiently giving medically related presentations in English as if to an

international audience. In addition, the learnt core skills can later be transferred to any future presentation commitments, be they in English or Japanese and presented at home or abroad.

- The third grade students focus on the use of medical English in everyday medical practice based on professional interactions between doctor and patient and a doctor and their colleagues. The aim of the course is to enable students to feel confident in their abilities to successfully communicate in English clearly in a variety of different practice scenarios. On top of this, students raise their awareness of a more patient centred approach to their future practice, one which is now typical in most contemporary western health settings.

Small group work provides opportunities for learners to use their language skills and is often less intimidating than large group work. Small groups can be set up according to interest or ability, and need not be equal in size or permanent (Bell & Burnaby, 1984). Furthermore, a number of educationalists have defended the use of small group teaching, focusing in particular on the value of the discussion which this format makes possible (e.g. Abercrombie, 1989, Northedge, 2003, Brookfield and Preskill, 1999)

Thus, the SEP offers the opportunity for less formal and more inclusive student-teacher interactions. Students gain opportunities for a more practical and collective learning experiences in addition to what is already offered via formal lectures and traditional tutorials. The distinguishing feature of the SEP is the amount of one-to-one and one-to-many exchanges and

its potential to generate peer learning through shared knowledge and understanding.

Research has shown that people's learning styles differ and that combining learning styles consolidates learning. The average learner retains about 20% of what is heard, 40% of what is seen and heard, and 75% of what is seen, heard, and done (Reisman and Carr 1991; Yager 1991). Therefore, in basic terms a traditional classroom offers visual and aural learning, whereas the practical nature of the SEP classes maximises the opportunity for learning by combining visual, aural and interactive learning. Thus, providing an environment designed to achieve the highest level of retention. Further to this, the process of interaction teaches a wide range of social and problem solving skills, as well as empowering the students to become active communicators.

Practitioners often use the term multilevel to identify any group of learners who differ from one another in one or more significant ways. Yet arguably, most if not all classes are multilevel because learners begin with varying degrees of competence and then progress at different rates in each of the language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Santopietro, 1991; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Kawasaki's students' possess a wide range of English educational experiences and have subsequently acquired different levels of ESL ability and interest. It is fair to say that by the time they begin tertiary medical study most have formed opinions on foreign language learning based on their previous experiences. One of the challenges facing the SEP is how best to

assimilate all of these variables in the formation of small groups.

At present (and historically) the SEP takes both a heterogeneous and homogeneous approach. The practical nature and collective learning within the SEP coupled with the educational precept that a positive interdependence can arise from students with varied learning levels working together and helping each other to reach an instructional goal - suggests that a Heterogeneous approach would be more valid. However, there is a need for evaluative research into this process to find the best possible way to organize a large, diverse group of learners into smaller groups and maximise learning potential.

One area that could improve the effectiveness of the course is assessments in the target situation (Dudley-Evans and St. John 2005). However, as in other studies, there should be some research done into understanding how doctors use English, i.e. genuine needs analysis, in order to make these assessments meaningful (Cleminson 2008).

### **3 . Unique Team of Teachers delivering a unique learning experience**

Presently SEP is taught by a culturally diverse group of 14 individuals who possess a multitude of skill sets and have acquired numerous working and teaching experiences through their lives in different countries. The cultural diversity of the team is an asset to the department, providing students with the opportunity to learn about a broad range of approaches to medicine and welfare.

Employing a diverse team with a wide skill-set guarantees a variety of styles and approaches will be utilised in the teaching of any given lesson theme. Thus, it is likely that students will experience differing teaching styles and methods over the course of one academic year. Naturally, some students might need time to acclimatise from one teaching style to another. However, experiencing a wide variety of approaches to medical welfare and differences in colloquial English taught from different cultural perspectives is something that would not be possible via one teacher.

The chief concern of the SEP coordinator is to ensure that the part-time teaching team is following the same teaching plan whilst providing enough licence for teachers to enrich the learning environment through their cultural diversity and creativity. However, managing such a diverse group generates some unique challenges and developmental issues that must be worked through over a period of time. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) contend that all groups attempting to work together go through inevitable stages, i.e. "Storming, Forming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning". Each stage represents various challenges to the team and its members before finally reaching the productive 'Performing' stage when roles have been established, goals are clear and members perform constructively as a team.

To create a part-time teaching team working with unified consistency while positively interacting and impacting on their student groups requires considerable management. In theory, Tuckman and Jensen's stages might

appear easy to identify, but the path is rarely as linear as their model suggests, with groups often returning to previous stages instead of moving forward. Thus, it is vital the coordinator remains aware and tries to identify and remedy possible barriers to reaching the Performing state. For example, when the constitution of the group has shifted or some other challenge has altered group members' perceptions and caused regression. Remaining observant, communicating openly with the team and presenting opportunities for genuine feedback on a regular basis allows the coordinator to adjust approaches and ensure the team remains in that positive stage of being.

#### 4 . Future Direction

The SEP has undoubtedly improved learning experiences over its short existence. However, due to a period of fluctuation in the teaching staff, it can be argued the full potential of the program has not been realised. In order to achieve this, it is essential to have some stability in the management of the program to allow systematic research and refinement of the teaching system. The three main areas of research that would provide a solid foundation for this program are:

1. studying the use of English by doctors within the hospital to ensure the content of the degree program is relevant to the patient and research related activities of graduated doctors
2. researching the relative benefits and disadvantages of homogenous and heterogeneous small groups lessons
3. identifying methods to incorporate the cultural richness of the program whilst maintaining a parity of service and language development amongst the student body.

If these areas are researched and relevant changes implemented, the SEP will have a greater chance of delivering courses that are relevant to the students' future professional needs, delivering the skills to stay abreast of key changes in the medical, welfare and academic communities both domestically and internationally.

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