

Breathing life into an economics course: Reinvigorating “the dismal science”

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Abstract

Teaching content-based EAP courses can be both rewarding and risky. This paper examines the creation of a content-based lecture course for students of International Economics at a Japanese University. The presenter provides a candid analysis of the perils and pitfalls of EAP course creation. The presentation will focus on syllabus creation, material development, pedagogical application and evaluation. It is hoped that educators can gain some practical insights into course design and teaching.

Keywords

Content-based learning, course design, English for academic purposes, material development

1 Introduction

This paper examines the challenges which three educators faced when designing and teaching a content-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) economics course. The author will discuss the pedagogical challenges which the teachers faced and how they overcame them.

2 Background

In their second year, students of International Economics at Ritsumeikan University take a two-credit course ‘Eigo Keizai Nyumon’ (EKN – Fundamental Economics in English). In 2010 three professors from Ritsumeikan University were asked to teach the EKN course. Being TEFL specialists these professors are not economics majors but they have considerable experience in teaching content-based learning (CBL) and EAP. This paper focuses on the collaborative design of the course and the creation of the course material. It examines the pedagogical issues involved with teaching the course and it describes how the course can be improved.

3 Course Design & Material Creation

When designing any course it is imperative to consider learner outcomes and the overall purpose of the course. For the EKN course the main purpose was to teach fundamental economic concepts in English. The design parameters that we faced were considerable. Although the course would start in April 2011 an online syllabus had to be created and submitted by December 2010. The practical application of this was that the EKN teachers had to design a syllabus for a course they had never taught and had no material for. It was decided to create a basic syllabus which would give the teachers the maximum amount of flexibility while teaching the course. Mankiw’s (2009) *Principles of Economics* (POE - International Student Edition) was selected as the core text.

To explain the content of POE it was agreed that PowerPoint files created by POE’s publishers would be adapted for our students. Worked examples and discussion questions were also woven into the PowerPoint slides to give an interactive component to the class. Mini-quizzes were created to check that the students had completed the preliminary required reading for each class.

Typically, one chapter of POE was assigned for each lecture. The EKN teachers agreed that review presentations on the content material covered would afford the students the chance to review and explain the key economic concepts. These presentations would act as a review prior to the mid-term and final examinations.

4 Pedagogical Application

The key word throughout the inaugural semester of the EKN course was undoubtedly ‘flexibility’. The three professors had to continually reassess the materials they created for the course in terms of suitability regarding EFL linguistic competence and economics knowledge. Despite having taken a similar course in Japanese when they were in their

first year at university, many students claimed not to have studied certain concepts or, most commonly, that they simply could not remember what they had studied the previous year. To this end, the professors had to readjust the material used and reconsider the demands made on the students.

4.1 Mini-quizzes

Through the mini-quizzes that initially were given at the start of each class, it was painfully clear which students had prepared and which had not. Later on in the semester these quizzes were administered after the formal lectures and often students were given the chance to work in groups to answer the questions.

4.2 Presentations

In the first half of the semester three fundamental topics were covered; Ten Principles of Economics; Thinking like an Economist; Interdependence and the Gains from Trade. Students were assigned presentation groups and each group presented on one of the topics.

The purpose of these presentations was to get the students to review the content covered in the lectures and also in POE, and then to present it in a digestible manner to their peers. These presentations were to act as a review for the mid-term examination. The presentations ranged from well prepared and rehearsed to a total lack of preparation resulting in disarray. End of term presentations were also given on; The Market Forces of Supply and Demand; Elasticity and its Application. The students presented in the same groups on both occasions.

4.3 Examinations

The mid-term and final examination had two main elements – true or false and multiple-choice questions. The true or false questions were chosen to test the students' basic knowledge of the content covered in the lectures and in POE. The multiple-choice questions aimed to test the students' ability to apply the principles learnt i.e. to make the jump from theory to practice.

When making both examinations the main concern was at what level the questions should be set. A question bank provided by the POE publishers was used to select the questions. 30 questions were selected – 16 true or false (0.5 points each) and 22 multiple-choice questions (1 mark each).

5 Evaluation and Improvements

Richards and Nunan (1994) acknowledge the need for further reflection within a teaching setting. The three EKN professors were asked to give their feedback on the EKN course at the end of the semester. Their comments will be discussed in the presentation along with the comments provided by students through a questionnaire administered at the end of the EKN course.

The first semester of any new course is subject to trial and error. All courses warrant reflection with a view to possible redesign. The comments of the teachers and students will be used to reexamine the EKN course and to help improve it. These improvements will also be discussed in the presentation.

6 Conclusion

Designing and implementing EAP content-based courses requires time, flexibility, and reflection. Economics is considered by some as 'less-attractive' than other subjects. The challenge of creating a course which is informative, interesting, and innovative, was a formidable one.

Careful pre-course planning with colleagues can greatly aid the selection of teaching materials and the initial design of the syllabus. Conducting an informal needs analysis can help shape course content and material design.

Feedback from students on the EKN course will be channeled into the next stage of the course design and hopefully this will lead to improvements. Similarly, post and pre-course teachers' meetings will help refine the course materials and the course in general.

The challenge for educators is to make courses and materials that bring alive the subject material. Through interesting lectures, challenging quizzes, and discussion topics, the EKN course tries to stimulate the students and allow them to see the relevance and practicality of studying the "dismal science." Breathing new life into a theory and model-bound subject is not an easy task, but it is one to which we must aspire.

References

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