

Curriculum Development for a Graduate Level Academic Discussion Course

Thomas Pals
International University of Japan

Abstract

This report is a detailed description of the curriculum used for English for International Relations & Development I (EIRD I) Discussion course at the International University of Japan (IUJ). It articulates the goals, objectives and rationale of the course, as well as the relationship to the parallel course (EIRD I) Oral Presentation. This report consists of the syllabus, weekly schedule, guidelines, assessment sheets, sample quiz, and sample lessons developed by the students in teacher-guided activities. In addition, assessment, vocabulary quizzes, and the final speaking test will be discussed. The course evaluation is used to discuss the effectiveness of the instructor and course. Recommendations are made to enhance the quality of both.

1. INTRODUCTION

English for International Relations & Development I (EIRD I) at the International University of Japan (IUJ) was a graduate level course that consisted of four components. Three components were based in academic writing (three 90-minute periods a week). The academic writing component accounted for eighty-five percent of the course grade. The EIRD I Discussion course was one component (one 90-minute period a week). EIRD I Discussion counted for fifteen percent of the overall grade in EIRD I. This paralleled EIRD I Oral Presentation. Students who attended the summer intensive English program took the discussions component because they had already taken the oral presentations component in the summer program. The students who did not attend the summer intensive English program took the oral presentations component. Since both the EIRD I Discussion course and the EIRD I Oral Presentation course consisted of the same value in the overall course grade, the workload for both components was roughly the same. The EIRD I Discussion course had two main group discussion projects, and the EIRD I Oral Presentation course had two oral presentations. In addition to this, both courses included pronunciation activities. The goals and objectives of the discussion course are listed in the syllabus (see section 3.).

2. STUDENT POPULATION

The EIRD I Discussion course consisted of twelve students who had participated in the summer intensive English program. Student-groups were divided into four groups consisting of three students each. Each group consisted of members from two different native languages. The rationale for these divisions was to insure that outside group work would be carried out in English. The news article project groups and the news video project groups were different to insure maximum exposure to various student backgrounds.

3. COURSE SYLLABUS

English for International Relations and Development I Discussion

Course Description

This course is designed to teach students how to carry on effective discussions, and then to give students the opportunity to practice these techniques. Students will lead two discussions during the course. Topics will be based on students' own interests in current news events (related to studies at IUJ).

Objectives

Students will:

1. Learn to effectively organize a topic for discussion.
2. Practice phrases used in expressing agreement/disagreement with an opinion.
3. Develop vocabulary.
4. Improve their pronunciation.
5. Increase their knowledge of content areas related to International Development Program (IDP) and International Relations Program (IRP).

Procedures:

Students will receive training for how to effectively keep a discussion going. Then students will present materials that they choose. They will select appropriate vocabulary needed for the topic of discussion and provide comprehension and discussion questions based on the material they selected.

Assessment:

Vocabulary Quizzes	30 %
Student Discussion # 1 (article)	25 %
Student Discussion # 2 (video)	25 %

Group Speaking Test	20 %
Materials	
Teacher produced handouts (news article and video)	
Student produced handouts (news articles and videos)	

4. COURSE SCHEDULE

The course material was based on a ten-week schedule. Class met for 90 minutes once a week. All other course work was done outside of the classroom in student-groups and teacher student-groups. These meetings were arranged by the students with the teacher.

Week 1 - Course syllabus, group discussion phrases, and pronunciation activity	
Week 2 - Article #1, guide for making news article discussion (instructor example)	
Week 3 - News video #1, guide for making news video discussion (instructor example)	
Week 4 - Vocabulary quiz #1, pronunciation activity, and group preparation	
Week 5 - Student Discussions # 1	(news article)
Week 6 - Student Discussions # 1	(news article)
Week 7 - Vocabulary quiz #2, pronunciation activity, and group preparation	
Week 8 - Student Discussions # 2	(news video)
Week 9 - Student Discussions # 2	(news video)
Week 10 - Vocabulary quiz #3, Group Speaking Test	

5. RATIONAL FOR STUDENT PRODUCED MATERIALS

Student-produced materials fulfilled both administrative and educational requirements for the EIRD I Discussion course. As stated in the introduction, to fulfill the administrative needs of the discussion course it was necessary to parallel the already established curriculum of the oral presentation course. Since the oral presentations were original works created by the students, some of the discussion topics were also created by

the students. In addition, the students were encouraged to use discussion techniques taught to them in the summer oral presentation course. This approach was used not only to reinforce the previous coursework but to also encourage real life debate and cooperation among students of different cultural backgrounds. Nonnative English speaking students have complained that they cannot keep up to the native speakers in discussions outside the classroom. With the additional training and practice contained in the EIRD I Discussion course, it was hoped that the goal of effective communication in discussions both in and out of the classroom could be attained.

6. REQUIREMENTS FOR ACADEMIC DISCUSSION NEWS ARTICLE

Students were given the following guidelines (see 6.1) in addition to an example lesson from the instructor. Students were given the following procedures (see 6.2). Each student-group met with the instructor three times in preparation for the news article project. The first meeting was to approve of the article chosen. Most groups presented three articles to the instructor. The instructor helped each group to choose the most appropriate one. In addition, the instructor met with the group to give feedback on the vocabulary exercise and questions they produced. The instructor met with the group a third and final time to check the second draft of the vocabulary exercise and questions.

6.1 Guidelines

1. Short article – no more than two A4 pages. This article should be from a newspaper or magazine. It should be independent from your other courses; however, it should relate to your studies at IUJ.
2. Vocabulary matching – 10 words/phrases selected by your group. You must include the vocabulary and definitions as a matching exercise. The vocabulary should be targeted as words that could be used in a variety of settings related to your studies at IUJ.
3. Comprehension questions – 5 questions that reflect the main points of interest in the article. In general, these questions should be both literal and interpretive (Hillman, 1990). The vocabulary words from the matching exercise should be utilized as part of the questions or answers to reinforce their usage.
4. Discussion questions – 5 questions that are raised by you concerning the chosen topic. In general, these questions should be application type questions that require

part of the student's own background knowledge to adequately answer and/or express an opinion about the given topic (Hillman).

6.2 Procedures Given to Students

1. You will be broken into groups of three students per group. Each group will be required to present one article for class discussion.
2. Each group member will lead a small group in a class discussion about their given topic.
3. Two articles will be presented on a given day. Each presentation will be limited to 40 minutes of class time.
4. Students will provide a hard copy of the article, vocabulary, comprehension, and discussion questions to the other students one week in advance of the class.
5. The instructor prior to its distribution to the class must approve the article, vocabulary, comprehension, and discussion questions. In addition, an electronic copy of the vocabulary, comprehension, and discussion questions must be sent to the instructor.
6. The format should be similar to the article discussed in week two of the course.

7. SAMPLE OF STUDENT PRODUCED NEWS ARTICLE LESSON

A total of four news articles were presented by the student-groups. The following article (see 7.1) was chosen by a group of two Indonesian students and one Japanese student. The corresponding vocabulary exercise and comprehension and discussion questions were created by the students based on the article (see section 7.2). The format models the lesson given by the instructor.

7.1 Article Chosen by One Student-group

Walkabout: Airline Woes

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse

BY ALEX PERRY

Friday, October 12, 2001

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse...

Pierre Jeannot might be someone you'd expect to cheerlead for the airlines. As president of the International Air Transport Association, which represents 280 airlines, he's paid to

be the face of modern passenger aviation. Lately, however, when he's asked about the prospects for his industry, he's been using phrases like "close to collapse," even "apocalyptic."

Since hijackers plunged the industry into unprecedented crisis, a Russian airliner with 78 people aboard was downed in the Black Sea (apparently hit by a stray Ukrainian missile) and 118 people died in Milan when an SAS passenger jet crashed into a hangar to avoid a runway collision. It's a measure of how bad things are for the airlines that reports of these latest incidents disappeared from newspapers in days. Jeannot had already been forecasting an industry annual loss of \$2.5 billion this year; in a few weeks, he's raised that to \$12 billion.

The nearest yardstick Jeannot and IATA are using as a pointer to the future is the 1991-2 Gulf War, when passenger traffic dropped off by a quarter and took a year to recover to its previous level of growth. But IATA also knows the experience of the Gulf War, which involved no plane hijackings or fatal air accidents, will only serve as the roughest of guidelines. Only one thing is certain, Jeannot said in Hong Kong this week. In the next six months, a number of airlines will follow Swissair and Sabena into bankruptcy.

Beyond that, no one knows what will happen. Jeannot is hoping that the demands of a cruel new world will sweep aside many of the discredited practices in modern aviation, such as flag-waving state support of inefficient airlines, restrictions on foreign ownership and piecemeal bilateral exchanges of flight routes. Aviation insiders generally agree there will be restructuring, takeovers, service cuts, and, as we've seen already, tens, even hundreds, of thousands of jobs lost.

Some experts are predicting nothing less than a fundamental shift away from airlines altogether and the emergence of fleets of small four- to 20-seater air taxis. The truth is, almost a century after the Wright brothers made their first flight on December 17, 1903, flying is entering another revolution. One more disaster, one can't help thinking, and much of what went up only a few weeks ago is going to come crashing down.

Write to TIME at mail@web.timeasia.com

7.2 Student Produced Vocabulary Exercise and Comprehension and Discussion Questions

Walkabout: Airline Woes Time Asia (Oct 12, 2001)

Vocabulary Matching

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------|---------------------------------|
| 1. close to collapse | _____ | a) basic outline |
| 2. apocalyptic | _____ | b) mergers & acquisitions (M&A) |
| 3. unprecedented | _____ | c) similar case |
| 4. nearest yardstick | _____ | d) almost bankrupt |

- | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|--|
| 5. roughest of guidelines | _____ | e) bad business habits |
| 6. discredited practices | _____ | f) no experience in the past |
| 7. flag-waving | _____ | g) changed slowly without a long-term plan |
| 8. piecemeal | _____ | h) dramatic changes |
| 9. takeovers | _____ | i) catastrophic |
| 10. fundamental shift away | _____ | j) exaggerated nationalism |

Comprehension Questions

1. What phrases has Pierre Jeannot used to express the current airline industry situation?
2. Why did the amount of his forecasted loss increase from \$2.5 million to \$12 million?
3. Does the experience of the Gulf War serve as "the roughest of guidelines"? Why? Why not?
4. What strategies will the aviation insiders use to increase the efficiency of their business?
5. What are some experts predicting for the business in the future?

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Pierre Jeannot and International Air Transportation Association (IATA) use the phrase "a pointer to the future"?
2. Do these incidents affect the airplane business and industries as a whole in your counties? If yes, How? If no, why not?
3. Will the incidents in New York, the Black Sea, and Milan decrease the demands of traveling by airplane in your country? Why? Why not?
4. How does the influence of the airplane tragedies effect to other businesses, which are connected to the airplane industries in your country and global market?
5. If you have to go to another place for domestic business in Japan, which mode of transportation will you use? Why?

8. REQUIREMENTS FOR ACADEMIC DISCUSSION NEWS VIDEO

Students were given the following guidelines in addition to an example lesson from the instructor (see section 8.1). In addition, the instructor facilitated student access to and recording of news stories.

Students were given the following procedures (see section 8.2). Each student-group met with the instructor three times in preparation for the news video project. The first meeting was to approve of the video chosen. Most groups presented one video to the instructor. The instructor either rejected or accepted the video. Each group offered the instructor a transcript of the news video. The instructor made some key explicit corrections to the transcript. In addition, the instructor met with the group to give feedback on the vocabulary exercise and questions they produced. The instructor met with the group a third and final time to check the second draft of the vocabulary exercise and questions.

8.1 Guidelines

1. Short News Story – Should be between 2 – 3 minutes. This video should be from a television news source (CNN, BBC, Bloomberg, ABC). It should be independent from your other courses; however, it should relate to your studies at IUJ.
2. Vocabulary matching – (same as news article guidelines see section 6.1)
3. Comprehension questions – (same as news article guidelines see section 6.1)
4. Discussion questions – (same as news article guidelines see section 6.1)
5. You are not required to provide a transcript but a rough one will probably help you produce the required vocabulary, comprehension questions, and discussion questions.

8.2 Procedures Given to Students

1. You will be broken into groups of three students per group. Each group will be required to present one news video for class discussion.
2. Each group member will lead a small group in a class discussion about their given topic.

3. Two videos will be presented on a given day. Each presentation will be limited to 40 minutes of class time. Keep in mind that between 6 - 9 minutes of this will be used to view the video. The video will be shown three times.
4. Students will provide a hard copy of the vocabulary, comprehension, and discussion questions to the other students one week in advance of the class.
5. The instructor prior to its distribution to the class must approve the video, vocabulary, comprehension, and discussion questions. In addition, an electronic copy of the vocabulary, comprehension, and discussion questions must be sent to the instructor.
6. The format should be similar to the video discussed in week three of the course.

9. SAMPLE OF STUDENT PRODUCED NEWS VIDEO LESSON

A total of four news videos were presented by the student-groups. The following news video was chosen by a group of two Indonesian students and one Japanese student. The corresponding vocabulary exercise and comprehension and discussion questions were created by the students based on the transcript (see sections 9.1 and 9.2). The transcript was given to the other students after the lesson was completed. This was done so that the students would focus on listening rather than just reading the transcript. The format models the lesson given by the instructor.

9.1 Student Produced Vocabulary Exercise and Comprehension and Discussion Questions

Argentina's Economic Plan CNN News (November 1, 2001)

Vocabulary Matching

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------|--|
| 1. Beleaguer | _____ | a. To become bankrupt |
| 2. Restructure | _____ | b. A company that estimates credit risk |
| 3. A debt default | _____ | c. to exchange something |
| 4. Semantic | _____ | d. to arrange in a new way |
| 5. Swap | _____ | e. having the same bad effect |
| 6. Tantamount | _____ | f. unpaid balance of a loan |
| 7. A knock on effect | _____ | g. Other events caused by a previous action in a sequence. |
| 8. Outstanding debt | _____ | h. having a lot of criticism and difficulties |
| 9. Go under | _____ | i. meaning in language |

10. A rating agency _____ j. failure to pay one's debt

Comprehension Questions

1. While the President announces the country's restructuring, what are some economists saying about Argentina?
2. What is the Argentina's outstanding debt balance?
3. What will happen when rating agencies decide Argentina has defaulted?
4. What is a possible of knock on effect from the Argentina's case?
5. How is Argentina restructuring its loans?

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Asian crisis of 1997 happen?
2. Do you think it is a good investment to buy your countries' bonds? Why or why not?
3. Which country do you think will most likely suffer the same kind of problem?
4. Do you think rating agencies are good for the world economy?
5. How can a country avoid financial crisis?

9.2 Student Produced Transcript

Argentina's Economic Plan *CNN News* (November, 1, 2001)

11th hour rescue planned for Argentina's beleaguered economy is already generating some controversy. President Fernando de la Rúa, on Thursday announced moves to restructure the country's debt load. But as Sonya Sequera reports, some economists are saying what they really add up to is a debt default.

Argentina's economy is in crisis. A fact investors have been aware of for a long time. The question now is "Can the country repay its 132 billion US dollar debt"? Over 70% of that debt is in the form of bonds. Unless, restructuring depends on bondholders accepting a lower interest rate, in return for a greater guarantee on repayments. Technically, it means Argentina is not honoring the original debt agreement and investors fear this amounts to a default.

This is a semantic issue here, because what is happening is that it will be a voluntary swap and you will be given the opportunity to swap or not? The question obviously for the people who don't, is will they get paid. So, that is the way it's got to be handled. In that sense, it is not technically a default although the rating agencies are already signaled in moving Argentina down. But they considered it tantamount to that.

The government is trying hard to defuse investor concerns. But if rating agencies do decide Argentina has defaulted, many investment funds will have to sell the assets in the country and there is a knock on effect. This is the biggest step restructuring of its kind and sets a precedent for other emerging economies with large outstanding debt, such as: Turkey and Brazil.

This is about debt defaulting emerging markets, reduced capital flows into those markets and then make them grow more slowly and of course Argentina is just underlining in a big thick black pen that emerging markets can go under.

Argentina is at least attempting to insure investors some return on their investment, all be it a lower one. But if its plan is ultimately considered as a default, other emerging economies could find the international bond market a hostile place to try and raise money.

Sonya Sequera, CNN London.

10. ASSESSMENT

The assessment of the students was based on six elements: one student-group news article (25%), one student-group news video (25%) (see 10.1), three vocabulary quizzes (30%) (see 10.2), and one group speaking test (20%) (see 10.5).

10.1 Assessment Sheet for the News Article and News Video

Article/Video Assessment

Vocabulary

20 points

- 10 words/phrases
- 10 definitions
- appropriate level
- definitions
- cross over use

Comprehension Questions

20 points

- five questions - literal and interpretive
- adequate summary of main points

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • four points per question 		
Discussion Questions	20 points	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • five questions - application • challenging subject matter • four points per question 		
Small Group Class Discussion	40 points	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interaction of group members • avoidance of dead space • use of target vocabulary • use of discussion phrases • avoidance of one/two student domination 		
Total	100 points	_____

10.2 Procedures of the Vocabulary Quizzes and Their Assessment

The first vocabulary quiz consisted of questions taken from the key words and phrases from the news article and news video lessons provided by the instructor. The second and third quizzes consisted of questions taken from the key words and phrases of the student-group led news article lessons (Quiz 2) and video lessons (Quiz 3). Each quiz consisted of two parts: oral matching and original sentence construction. The oral matching was based on the matching exercise from each news article/video lesson. The instructor read either the key word/phrase or the definition. The students were expected to write the corresponding key word/phrase or definition. In the original sentence section of the quiz, the instructor read a key word/phrase and the student was required to write an original sentence using that key word/phrase.

10.3 Rational for English/English Vocabulary Quizzes

The English/English vocabulary format was used for several reasons. As part of the writing component of EIRD I, students were being taught the importance of avoiding plagiarism. They were required to write both summaries of articles and paraphrases of text. Since these skills require a depth of knowledge of the target language, one of the

objectives of the discussion component was to develop vocabulary not only in terms of recognition of new words/phrases, but also in the breadth of knowledge necessary to be able to manipulate the language to the extent needed for successful summarizing and paraphrasing.

The following example (see section 10.4) was the second quiz given. The bold type indicates the key words/phrases or definitions read by the instructor.

10.4 Quiz # 2

Vocabulary Quiz #2 (Teacher Copy) (40 total points)
Oral Matching (2 points each)

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Keep something up your sleeve | keep a plan or an idea secret until you need it |
| 2. Know-how | knowledge and experience |
| 3. To a lesser extent | not as frequent |
| 4. A central plank | a main point of the policy of an organization or a country |
| 5. Bipartisan | members of two opposing parties that cooperate for a collaborative goal |
| 6. To give a green light | to allow / to agree |
| 7. Unprecedented | no experience in the past |
| 8. Flag-waving | exaggerated nationalism |
| 9. Piecemeal | changed slowly without a long-term plan |
| 10. Proliferate | to increase rapidly |
| 11. Hit a postwar high | reach its peak since the end of WW II |
| 12. Jam-packed | very crowded |

Please use the phrase your teacher says in an original sentence: (4 points each)

1. **Bargaining**
2. **Hammer out**
3. **Close to collapse**
4. **Putting a brave face on things**

10.5 Procedures of the Group Speaking Test and Its Assessment

Students were divided into four groups of three. The group members were different from their news article and news video groups. Group members were given ten minutes to discuss the issues surrounding their given topic. The topics were chosen by

the students at random from a pool of the eight student-group produced lessons. They were allowed to use any notes and handouts pertaining to any of the lessons from the course. Students were given a copy of the assessment guide one week prior to the group-speaking test. Each group was recorded for further review by the instructor and or the students in case of scoring conflicts.

Group Speaking Test Assessment		
Interaction of group members	15 points	_____
Use of target vocabulary	15 points	_____
Use of discussion phrases	10 points	_____
Avoidance of one/two student domination	5 points	_____
Avoidance of dead space	5 points	_____
Total	50 points	_____

11. Course Evaluation

The overall rating of the course was 8.44 on a ten-point scale. See attached evaluation forms. The average for all of the courses in the Graduate School of International Relations for the fall term in 2001 was 8.35. While the EIRD I Discussion course was rated slightly higher than the other courses, there is a need to improve both the quality of instruction and content in the course. The instructor received high marks and comments for the organization of the course; however, the achievement of course objectives was scored the lowest of all other aspects of the course. This suggests that while the instructor micro-managed individual aspects of the course well, he/she did not adequately explain or follow the objectives of the course as stated in the syllabus. This suggests that the syllabus, especially the course objectives, should be restated with greater detail and clarity.

Other themes addressed in the evaluation concerned the degree to which the instructor made the course stimulating and the course materials helpful. Since most of

the course materials were created by the students, one might assume they would be sufficiently stimulated by the materials and find them useful. Even though the instructor approved of all of the materials created by the students in the class, the materials may not have been offered with equal enthusiasm and clarity due to the variety of student styles in presenting. Another contributing problem might have been the time constraints placed on the students. If the instructor had been able to allow for follow-up large group discussions, the course materials may have been perceived as more stimulating and effective.

In conclusion, the curriculum of any course needs time to develop and become more effective. Even when a course is perceived as having been an overall success, an examination of the effectiveness of the instructor and the course as a whole is beneficial.

REFERENCES

Hillman, L. (1990). *Reading at the university*. Boston, Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Mintier, T. (London Bureau Chief). (2001, November 1). World News. Argentina's economic plan. *CNN International*.

Perry, A. (2001, October 12). Walkabout: Airline woes. *Timeasia.com*. 1 page. Online. Available: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/travel/column/0,9754,179266,00.html> (2002, February 6).