Reflecting on Kobe University's 2018 Accelerated Course in English (ACE)

1. An overview of the ACE course

In 2017 the School of Languages and Communication (SOLAC) at Kobe University established the Accelerated Course in English (ACE) in order to respond to the growing needs of its students. Its predecessor, the Global English Course (GEC), piloted a conference model (Tapper & Gruba, 2000) that was planned and managed primarily by the first-year students themselves, in cooperation with partner institutions overseas. However, this option was only available to the limited number of students who took part in the PSA program; those who did not go abroad were unable to take part in the student conference. Since the ACE program does not include a study-abroad component, the student conference is instead held here in Kobe and all students are now able to take part by delivering a presentation in English at the conference.

The ACE program takes place in the Fall semester of the students’ first year (October to January) and involves approximately 200 undergraduate students from across the university’s ten faculties. Students can elect to take part in the course and are chosen according to their TOEIC IP or TOEFL ITP scores, with the top 5% to 15% of applicants eligible for inclusion. The number of participants from each faculty is listed in Table 1.
The 2018 cohort was divided into ten classes, some made up of students from up to three different faculties. On average each class had around 25 students, which is considerably less than most general English classes at Kobe University, where the average is usually upwards of 40. Another key feature of the ACE program is that the instructors are all native-speakers of English, meaning the classes are conducted entirely in English. This challenges the advanced students to push their English abilities to new heights. In 2018, the instructors were Ellen Rettig-Miki, Tim Greer, Greg Sholdt, Cynthia Quinn and Alina Anton.

The syllabus is coordinated across classes and team-taught in order to deliver a more consistent program for all students. While all Kobe University students study the subjects known as *English Literacy B1/B2* and *English Communication B1/B2*, the ACE program maps onto these subjects. All ACE students use the same textbook, "In Focus 3" (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2014), with each teacher collaborating to teach part of the content. The focus across the classes is on fostering critical thinking skills and allowing the students to develop their academic literacy via active task-based learning.
Early on in the course, each student chooses one of the topics from the textbook to research in further depth, and this becomes the theme for their presentation at the student conference. For instance, if the topic from the textbook is gender equality, a student may choose to narrow that topic to "emergent equality in Rwandan politics" or "historical roots of the gender pay gap". In the English Literacy class, they must find and summarize two academic articles that are related to their chosen theme in Quarter 3 and then write an academic essay on that topic during Quarter 4. They also build on the same topic in the English Communication class, where the instructor helps to develop it into a poster presentation. In this way, the students receive feedback from both instructors and there is both cooperation and autonomy built into the program.

Students also read about a range of important social issues such as free trade, nuclear power and water scarcity, researching them and actively
discussing them in English with their peers. This gives each student a base knowledge of the core issues. The program culminates in the student conference at the end of Quarter 4, a full-day program where all ten ACE classes come together to present their findings in English.

This report will examine the students' reflections on the 2018 ACE classes in order to improve future iterations of the program. An online survey was conducted in class toward the end of the program (January, 2019), and the report analyzes the students' evaluation of the two classes (Sections 2 and 3) as well as the conference and the ACE program in general (Section 4). Areas of concern and future improvements will be noted in Section 5.

2. Student feedback on the ACE English Literacy (B1, B2) class

We begin by examining the students' feedback on the English Literacy classes, where the focus was on reading and writing. The survey was conducted in English via Google form documents. Of the 200 students, 160 responses were recorded for this section of the survey. Firstly, the students were asked to evaluate their own level of effort during the two Literacy classes. As shown in Figure 2.1, they generally rated their performance highly, with 93% of the students ranking themselves as satisfactory or higher. Anecdotal evidence during class backed this up, since the instructors also spoke highly of the students' performance in these classes.

![Figure 2.1 The Students' Evaluation of their Own Effort during the English Literacy Class](image)

The students' evaluations of the instructors were likewise high in these classes (Figure 2.2). The majority felt that the instructors were effective teachers who were available and helpful and provided feedback in a timely manner. They also
felt that the way the instructors spoke was easy to follow, which is an important consideration in an English-medium EFL class. Overall, it seems that the instructors in these classes have been doing an excellent job. Unfortunately, due to the completion of their contracts, two of the key teaching staff will leave at the end of the 2018 academic year, so we face an upward challenge with the 2019 cohort in training new instructors to take over these classes.

The students were also asked to consider their impressions of the course content. As shown in Figure 2.3, they generally agreed that their writing ability in English had improved throughout the program (84%), and most also felt that the content covered in the ACE Literacy classes would be useful if they were to study overseas in the future (81%).
Likewise, 79% of the ACE students acknowledged that they had gained a better ability to structure an academic paper in English, which was one of the key aims of the program. The highest ranked item on this section of the survey, shown in the fourth graph in Figure 2.3, was, "Classes that include this sort of writing component should be essential for Kobe University students in the future". One hundred and forty-two of the 160 students agreed with this statement, demonstrating their recognition of the value of learning to think and write critically in English in order to participate in international academic discourse.

In particular, the sorts of academic writing skills that they listed as important included;

- summarizing articles
- writing persuasively
- expressing their opinion logically
- recognizing the structure of academic articles
- APA citation, and
- understanding and using academic expressions

Many also appreciated the use of online collaborative platforms like Google+ so that they could discuss and correct their writing with the instructor and other class members.

On the other hand, there were also some areas they felt could be further improved. Many wanted more opportunities to write, and this is something that instructors could incorporate into future programs via additional non-graded homework tasks. Others felt that the topics from the textbook alone were too limiting and wanted the freedom to write about something that was completely unrelated to those topics. This too is something that could be negotiated with the instructor at an early point in the course. Some felt that the English Literacy class was not as active as the Communication class and wanted more opportunities to talk with other class members. This is somewhat inevitable given the nature of the focus on reading and writing, but it is something we should be aware of in future ACE classes, and aim to accommodate more interaction into the Literacy classes as well. On the whole though, the students were satisfied with the course as it is and were unable to list any suggested improvements.
3. Student feedback on the ACE English Communication (B1, B2) class

The students were also asked about their impressions of the English Communication classes via a similar online survey. This time there were 165 responses. Overall their self-evaluations were lower than in the Literacy classes (Figure 3.1), but their impressions of the instructors were better (Figure 3.2). That said, their ratings for both classes remain high.

![Figure 3.1. The Students’ Evaluation of their Own Effort during the English Communication Class](image)

As shown in Figure 3.2, the vast majority of the students agreed with each of the four components, rating the instructors particularly well in regard to the effectiveness of their teaching approach (92%), their availability (88%), and their intelligibility (88%).

![Figure 3.2. The Students’ Evaluation of their Communication Instructor](image)
Student satisfaction was also high with regards to their language improvement in the Communication class. As shown in Figure 3.3, they generally agreed that their speaking ability had improved over the course of the semester (78%), and they felt that content of the course would be of use in a study-abroad context (81%). Ninety percent of the participants indicated that their English presentation skills had improved, and a similar percentage agreed that these sorts of presentation skills should continue to be taught at Kobe University in the future. All in all, the survey indicates that the students are satisfied with the English Communication component of the ACE class as well.

Aspects of the course that the participants listed as particularly useful or valuable included:

- learning how to give a poster presentation
- participating in group discussions
- receiving feedback from both peers and instructors
- having the opportunity to speak with a range of different students
- being part of an "all English" environment
- learning how to use PowerPoint and Google Scholar

On the whole, the students' comments indicated that they were satisfied with the Communication classes.

When asked for their suggestions for improving the Communication class, there were a few recurring themes. Some felt that the class needed to have more listening activities. Since the textbook does not feature many of these sorts of exercises, this is something that the instructors will have to be more cognizant of.
in future classes, perhaps augmenting the textbook through the use of freely available listening resources on YouTube, Netflix or similar online sites. Some instructors have already been adding these sorts of videos to their classes, using them as an opportunity for students to summarize and discuss videos related to the week’s theme.

Students also pointed out the need for smaller class sizes, which of course would be preferable, although not entirely practical. At present the relatively small number of students in the ACE class (approximately 25) is still much better than that in the regular English classes, which contain 40 to 44 on average. Other students also expressed a desire for the ACE classes to go for longer, either by commencing in the second quarter or extending into the second year. For a variety of practical reasons this too is not feasible, although it does speak to the high value they placed on the course and its content.

Finally, some students said they would appreciate more frequent opportunities to present in class. This is something that instructors could accommodate by introducing shorter presentations on different topics that would not necessarily have to be delivered in front of the whole class; they could, for example, consist of a short paired presentation delivered in front of a small group of classmates, and therefore could be developed and delivered within the same 90-minute slot. The instructors will take this and other student suggestions into account as they continue to develop the program.

4. The ACE student conference

The third and final section of the survey asked the students for their feedback on the student conference and overall impressions of the ACE program. There were 146 respondents in this section.

As outlined in Figure 4.1, student satisfaction with the conference was also high. For the most part they agreed that the timing towards the end of the fourth quarter was appropriate, although in their comments some also suggested other possible ways to hold it: on a weekday or after the fourth quarter exams, for instance. We aim to hold the conference on the final Saturday of January so that the largest number of students can participate. It is difficult to hold it on a
weekday because students are committed to other classes, while after exams is not feasible either due to extra-curricular activities, intensive classes and the like. One other possibility might be to hold it a week or two earlier on the Adult’s Day public holiday, but some students would not be able to attend because they were involved in that festival and that would also leave them less time to prepare. In the end, it is difficult to find a time that suits everyone, and we may just have to make do with the timing as it is.

Figure 4.1 Student Feedback on the ACE Conference

Many students expressed their satisfaction with presenting at the conference via the poster presentation format. This was something that we changed from the previous year’s conference, in which we held a mix of both posters and oral presentations. Due to the limitations of the venue (Centennial Hall), at the inaugural event in AY2017 we were forced to split the conference into two sections, locating the oral presentations in D-block. Due to the distance, this took time and many of the students did not attend the oral presentations. Keeping everyone together in the one venue proved to be much more successful. Moreover, the poster format holds a number of advantages for EFL students; allowing them to discuss their work more freely with a smaller audience reduces nerves and facilitates genuine interaction.

Nonetheless we were interested to know if the students would prefer to have more oral presentations in the future. As shown in the third graph in Figure 4.1, that notion did have some agreement, but also had a higher number of respondents who disagreed than any of the other survey items they were given. Although we can never please everyone, future ACE student conferences
will probably remain with the same poster presentation format and timing, for both practical and pedagogical reasons.

Other initiatives that were introduced this year included the introduction of international student TAs as audience members. This gave the ACE students greater opportunities to interact with expert English speakers during their presentations as well as informally at the conference. However, one unexpected criticism of this came from those ACE students who were on the Site Committee. As a student-run conference, various committees made up of the ACE students organized and managed the conference. In the survey one student from the site committee commented that they also should be paid (like the TAs) to attend because they were working at the conference. Again, this is difficult to address, but it may be worth impressing on them the difference between the TAs and the students themselves. There were also a couple of criticisms of the voting system (for Best Presentation), and the process should be reassessed for AY2019 in order to ensure its fairness and transparency.

Another student mentioned the possibility of including a (plenary) guest speaker from outside the ACE course. This is something we did in AY2017, but changed it in favor of three brief plenary presentations from the ACE students themselves. This point is one that it is negotiable and we will carefully consider that aspect of the program for the AY2019 conference.

Finally, the students were asked to give an overall evaluation of the ACE program, including both the classes and the student conference. Their ratings are displayed in Figure 4.2 from 1 (very good) to 5 (very poor). We are
pleased to report that the vast majority of the participants rated the program highly.

Figure 4.2 The Students’ Overall Impression of the ACE Program

The aspects of the course that stood out most for the ACE students were the "passionate native speaking teachers", "discussing social issues in English", the practical yet academic nature of the classes, and the opportunities to interact with a wide variety of people. This last point is perhaps best reflected in the student conference capstone event, in which the students must discuss their research with peers from other faculties. For many of them, it was the first time for them to speak with students from different academic backgrounds and they seemed to enjoy the chance for a genuine exchange of opinions on topics that they had developed over the course of the semester. This in itself gets to the essence of communication--interacting for a reason, not just as a task or an exercise. In this sense, the ACE student conference gives them a short "study abroad" experience by creating a simulated English-medium environment here in Japan. However brief it may be, it could be said that the student conference ultimately gives more "bang for the buck", by allowing all the ACE students to take part for almost no cost. This compares favorably to its predecessor in the PSA program, in which only a small number of the overall cohort took part in the conference, and at much greater personal expense.
Would you like to study abroad in the future?
146 responses

Figure 4.3 Interest in Future Study Abroad

The final question in the survey simply asked students about their desire to study abroad in the future. As shown in Figure 4.3 above, the vast majority of students ACE students (90%) expressed interest in following up the program with some sort of study abroad program in the future. This is perhaps their greatest testimony to the success of the ACE program within Kobe University's objective to foster a global outlook among its graduates.

References

There were 250 slots allocated to the course, but for a variety of reasons, only 200 were eventually filled. This is something that needs further investigation, but one possible factor is that some students who were originally selected for the ACE class in the Spring semester were later able to gain exemption for these subjects after they achieved a higher TOEFL or TOEIC score.