

# Curriculum Development Report: The Introduction of the EPIC Program to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Senmon English Curriculum

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## Introduction

The 2016/17 curriculum restructuring, resulting from the transformation of the Faculty of Humanities and Economics into the new Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, included the re-designation of General Education kiso foreign language classes as specialized senmon language classes to be convened as a part of the new faculty curriculum. The kiso foreign languages classes from the previous curriculum, for second-year students and above, including most of the kiso English courses, were renamed as Senmon (English/German/Chinese/French/Spanish/Korean) I/II, and taught once per week instead of twice. However, any curriculum development in one area can also have an impact elsewhere in the broader language curriculum with a so-called domino effect causing timetabling and human resources repercussions, and impacting future curricular considerations in both expected and unexpected ways. In addition to the fundamental vision and academic objectives of improving an existing curriculum, the subsequent impact on the broader curriculum must also be managed successfully in order to see a curriculum project through to fruition. One such impact was that many of the kiso classes from the old curriculum were taught by part-time instructors, and the change to senmon level meant reduced hours for these teachers. This reduction in kiso teaching meant a reduction in some of the most rewarding teaching and learning opportunities in the foreign languages curriculum, especially as it relates to English; as elective courses, many of the previous kiso English classes featured small class sizes with higher levels of motivation. Assigning these additional classes to active part-time teachers was a way of rewarding excellence in language teaching and contribution to Kochi University language education. From this perspective, unfortunately, it is these very teachers who are hit hardest by this most recent curriculum development. Another complicating factor in the faculty curriculum reform was how to deal with the EPIC Program which had long been a valuable, though highly irregular, part of the General Education kiso English curriculum because it was taught as a set package of six classes. EPIC had always required special considerations from the perspective of course administration and in managing the cap in the total number of foreign language credits a student can take in one academic year. Thus, when General Education kiso English classes changed to the senmon category, redesignating the EPIC Program was complicated both from a curriculum perspective and from the personnel perspective because two of the three EPIC instructors were part-time teachers. Given its special status in the foreign languages curriculum, and as we shall see from this report, given that EPIC may actually be better situated within the senmon curriculum, it is with a great deal of excitement to report that the basic structural organization of EPIC has been transferred

intact to the new curriculum, and that the part-time instructor posts were kept as well. As we think about how to further develop the EPIC Program as a faculty senmon option for highly motivated English language students, and how to promote it to prospective students, this report takes a look back to explain the curricular rationale for implementing EPIC, and concludes by profiling some of the curricular innovation and teaching approaches that have recently shaped the program. This report is meant to provide a framework within which the three articles by EPIC course instructors, published in this volume of the *Research Reports of the International Studies Course*, can be read.

## EPIC Background

The English Program for International Communication (EPIC) was introduced into the Kochi University General Education curriculum in the 2004 academic year. It was first conceptualized as a needs-based natural curricular outcome of the English Conversation placement test streaming project, which had begun the year before in 2003. The broader curricular goals of EPIC addressed a number of shortcomings in the General Education English language curriculum including the lack of course options for students with intermediate and advanced level English communication skills, poor curricular coordination between English courses, and the low intensity of English language study making progress slow for those students who wanted to focus on English. Specifically, first-year students who had demonstrated a higher level of ability and motivation to study in their compulsory English Conversation course had no viable options to further nurture their motivation to continue learning English as second-year students; the design and implementation of this special new course was therefore necessary to fulfill the needs of these students. EPIC was also meant to serve a second-year bridge between the General Education kiso English curriculum and the more specialized English study required at the senmon level.

## Course Description

While the EPIC Program has evolved in significant ways over the years, the core features remain the same. EPIC is an intensive suite of six English-medium courses for students who have demonstrated high achievement in the two upper levels of the streamed first-year English Conversation course. Students are selected for EPIC partly based on ability and performance as first-year students, and motivation to improve their English. The program is limited to 24 students but typically has class sizes of about 10-15 students. EPIC applicants must pass a spoken interview test and a writing exam to qualify for the program. Both speaking and writing are assessed through a rotating double-graded two-examiner system involving all three EPIC instructors. Designed to satisfy the needs of upper-intermediate students, the course content is stimulating, but challenging. The six-course program covers the development of the four language skills and includes a variety of applied activities and projects. The three instructors closely coordinate course material and individual courses are sometimes team-taught. Students who take EPIC are provided with a full starting assessment of language ability and regular progress assessments throughout the semester. The EPIC Program also features the award of a special Diploma. To receive the EPIC Diploma, students must successfully pass all six EPIC courses with a grade of B or higher in each course, and be able to function at the B2.1 level

(or above) in each of the three domains of language use (Understanding/Speaking/Writing) covered in the Common European Framework of Reference Scales for Japan (CEFR-J).

## Organization of the EPIC Program

When the EPIC Program was first conceived and operationalized, individual subjects were divided into five-lesson units, with each of the three EPIC teachers responsible for units of work from each of the skills and applied courses. This was based on the idea that language abilities are not independent of each other, and that materials covered in one unit would be regularly recycled in other units. A program of six courses, each subdivided into smaller units and taught in a coordinated fashion, contributes to an inclusive notion of competence. Courses do not run independently, but interlock in terms of content all of which is closely coordinated by the three course instructors in terms of entry level assessments, materials, objectives, and final assessments. The EPIC course was also designed to place primary focus on the production skills, even when teaching the receptive skills of listening and reading. As such, the EPIC course was structured to meet the motivational needs of an increasing number of students for whom traditional university EFL curriculums are not designed. Over the years, EPIC has attracted Japanese students who have grown up abroad, students who have spent a year of high school in an English-speaking country, motivated students who are in preparation for a year of language study in a foreign university, students who have attended international schools here in Japan, students who have graduated from special courses in Japanese high schools, Japanese students of mixed nationality, and foreign students from other countries where English is taught as a foreign/second language. EPIC has thus helped to serve the English language needs of full-time international students from countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea, China, Vietnam, Mongolia, India, and Nepal. These students add great linguistic and cultural diversity to the communicative EPIC classroom and help to keep motivation high in terms of using English as the means of communication in EPIC not only between teachers and students but among students as well. While most EPIC students have typically been from the Department of International Studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Economics, students from other faculties, departments, and programs regularly enroll in EPIC too, and add a different but welcomed dynamic.

EPIC was also designed to meet the challenge of creating educational programs to develop the communicative proficiencies of university learners. In 2004 there were loud calls for universities to produce more graduates who could potentially use English in the workplace. There was a need for innovative English language programs based on sound curriculum theory, some of which may have seemed radical in comparison to what was then available to students in universities not specifically focused on foreign language education. EPIC represented an attempt to integrate research findings on motivation at the classroom and curriculum levels with the motivational dispositions of students targeted for the course. Crucial to this integration was *intensity of study*, a feature seen as lacking in many Japanese university contexts, even today, yet widely acknowledged as fundamental for language improvement. While the degree of intensity for EPIC may not seem radical when compared to other ELT contexts, it was seen as a vast improvement on the existing system in which courses were taught only once or twice per week. This profile feature of intensity was buttressed by other key course design features such as the coordination of content and objectives, manageable class size, and the teaching

of English in English. EPIC requires a strong commitment from students to fulfill the intensity feature. Second-year students enrolling in EPIC devote roughly a full one-quarter of their first semester timetable to an intensive upper-intermediate level program of study, a considerable commitment in light of the wide credit requirements they must fulfill. Prior to EPIC's implementation, these students did not have a multi-skill intensive course to suit their motivational needs.

## Catering to Motivational Predispositions of EPIC Applicants

As noted, the EPIC curriculum was designed on the basis of motivation research findings to purposefully accommodate the motivational dispositions of intermediate to upper-intermediate Japanese university EFL learners. In order to provide such courses, unorthodox approaches to course design are sometimes necessary to match learner motivation with appropriate content. EPIC students typically exhibit all of the following motivational influences: motivation to study English intensively, motivation to study English using English, motivation to study English with students of a similar level, motivation to improve a specific skill or overall language skills, motivation to correct previous negative learning experiences, and extrinsic motivation. Understanding the range of learner motivations is crucial for teachers in designing a course tailored to meet their needs. One example of how this was done is related to program structure. Instead of having one teacher for 15 classes of Spoken English, students take smaller units from each of the three teachers. Students are often interested in non-traditional learning opportunities, and presenting components of a course in this unique way functions to arouse student interest through unorthodox course design. Student interest is maintained by progressing and succeeding through a series of attainable short-unit mini-goals<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, provision of the EPIC Diploma serves to address extrinsic motivation orientations.

## Ongoing Development of the EPIC Curriculum

The current structure of EPIC has evolved in significant ways since 2004. The original division of each of the six courses into three five-class units proved difficult to operationalize in the classroom. Teachers found that they needed more class time to cover their basic units of instruction, and also to pilot, or experiment with, new materials and approaches. Because such experimentation is a core feature of EPIC, slight adjustments to the program structure were needed to ensure the best environment for ongoing pedagogical innovation. EPIC is essentially a classroom laboratory; working intensively with able, motivated students makes for a ripe teaching environment to pilot new materials. The EPIC Program provides a rare opportunity for course instructors to see how students react to new material, and a dynamic of ongoing curriculum and materials development is continually nurtured. Examples of how this language teaching innovation is generated in actual classroom practice can be seen in the three articles related to EPIC pedagogy by David Leslie, Sean Burgoine, and Darren Lingley in this volume of *Research Reports of the International Studies Course*.

Instead of three smaller five-class units per course, each of the six EPIC courses are now subdivided into two

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete discussion of how motivation research guided the design of the EPIC Program, see Lingley (2005).

modules of instruction that are more flexible in terms of length. In practice, this means that the three EPIC instructors are responsible for four modules during the semester, and usually one of these modules receives more teaching time than the others. In addition to this need to lengthen some units of instruction, considerable class time is required at the beginning of the course to orient students toward the self-access features of the program and what is required of them in terms of basic foundational aspects of participating in an English-medium program. In addition to challenging in-class course materials, EPIC students are encouraged to supplement their studies with self-access learning and extensive reading. One of the goals of EPIC is to nurture learner autonomy in language study. Students also needed to have some basic instruction on such matters as the pragmatics of English email communication with course teachers, document formatting for English writing assignments, and orientation about the collaborative use of Google Docs and browser plugins such as Grammarly, which are specifically required for the core EPIC writing module in which students publish their work online. These features are now common in computer-based writing environments and students need to understand not only how to use them more effectively but also to be aware of the limitations of such tools. Thus, in order to optimize the EPIC experience for participating students and cover essential program features, three Foundation Units were added with each course teacher being responsible for common course components in need of attention.

## Integration of CEFR-J Descriptors in the EPIC Curriculum

One of the important Foundation Units familiarizes students with the CEFR-J descriptors and outcomes that we have consciously made more central to our EPIC curriculum and teaching practice. This recent curricular development for EPIC has further transformed the program in several ways: 1.) in terms of establishing a clear central point of reference for the expected entry level into EPIC, 2.) how language use in EPIC courses can be described and specified in terms of proficiency, 3.) in defining what a student can do with the language upon completion of the EPIC Program and, most importantly, 4.) by setting coherent and reasonable outcomes that guide teaching practice. The use of CEFR-J scales has helped to more consistently frame entrance standards for acceptance to EPIC. It is expected that applicants will be able to function well in the three domains of language use (Understanding/Speaking/Writing) at the level of B1.2 or above in order to be accepted to EPIC. The CEFR bands are also a convenient tool for describing proficiency levels of EPIC students. By this I mean a *negotiated* description based on how the teacher describes what the learner can do with the language, and a tool for the learner to describe what they can do based on a self-assessment. This is noteworthy because we do not use the CEFR-J scales for specific assessment purposes in EPIC courses. As a starting reference point for an entrance test, or a diagnosis of language abilities in need of tuition, or as a self-assessment tool for the learner, is where CEFR is most useful as a guideline; there are simply too many contextual variables in play to use it for course assessment. While CEFR can be used in the *development* of assessment in various contexts, it is not specifically an assessment in the sense that there is no governing body that formally assesses a student as, for example, B2 or C1. However, given that the CEFR descriptors clearly define what a student can do with the language upon completion of the EPIC Program, they have a much more useful meaning than a university course grade in helping to understand what is required to pass EPIC and be awarded its special Diploma. Those students who receive the EPIC Diploma are also presented with a course description that

includes a CEFR-J reference point which describes student levels in terms of what they can do, and how well they can do it, for Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking, the latter of which is subdivided into ‘interaction’ and ‘production’. This provides a more accurate reflection of actual English ability than a university letter grade. Previous EPIC Diploma results indicated performance only in terms of course grades which have virtually no meaning for external purposes. A CEFR Global Scale Ranking is indicated on the EPIC Diploma as well. There is no CEFR point of reference for the two applied courses (Culture Studies and Media) in EPIC. The CEFR descriptors and outcomes are important for the EPIC Program because of their emphasis on actual language use and communicative abilities. Finally, regarding target outcomes, setting coherent and reasonable outcomes effectively guides teaching practice. This is the real strength of how CEFR is utilized in EPIC. The target outcomes for most EPIC instruction is geared towards B2.2 or higher. This is where CEFR is most useful for our particular EPIC teaching context. All of the EPIC courses are communicative in orientation and setting target outcomes in speaking, writing and understanding, which are based on CEFR-J reference points, helps to keep the teaching focus on *language use*.

When we decided to integrate CEFR as a stronger guiding curricular tool for the EPIC Program, we were able to formally consult with Dr. Bärbel Kühn from the University of Bremen, Germany. An acknowledged CEFR expert, Dr. Kühn visited Kochi University to discuss with EPIC teachers about how CEFR could be applied to our unique language teaching program. Dr. Kühn’s consultation was valuable because, while we were looking for specific and concrete answers to questions about applying CEFR principles to EPIC, her approach was to shift the way we thought about EPIC in such a way that actually raised more questions about what we were doing in EPIC, and to think instead about how CEFR principles could be made relevant to the students enrolled in EPIC. This question is foremost in accomplishing the broader curricular goals of EPIC. As we continue to develop EPIC on a curricular level, our ongoing challenge will be how to more effectively mediate to learners and other stakeholders in the broader community who are unfamiliar with CEFR, about why the CEFR principles are so important in the development of communicative language competencies. As we look to further integrate CEFR, the idea of developing the CEFR-related sociolinguistic and pragmatic points of reference for Japanese language learning contexts like EPIC is an interesting area for future consideration.

## Published ELT Research Generated from EPIC

In this issue of *Research Reports of the International Studies Course*, three articles are published representing the pedagogical approaches used by EPIC instructors. First, in “Producing a Student-Written Website: Negotiating Process, Genre, and Pedagogy in Publishing L2 English Writing”, David Leslie describes his work with students to develop their writing skills. His writing module, a prominent feature of the EPIC Program, culminates in publishing student writing on the Life in Kochi website. It is an extremely motivating experience for students to see their English writing published for a real audience. The article by Sean Burgoine, “A Four Strands Approach to Content-Based Instruction in an EFL Context”, highlights how language teaching research guides classroom practice in EPIC. His CBI module, based on his original classroom materials and CBI best practice in FL education, and firmly rooted in a sound pedagogical

framework for communicative language teaching, exemplifies ‘praxis’ at work in the EPIC classroom. My own paper, “Using Authentic Spoken Texts for Teaching Listening: Operationalizing the Diagnostic Approach”, is a pedagogical rationale calling for a shift in focus in how listening is taught, and demonstrating how this is accomplished in the EPIC classroom. These articles represent models of best practice in the intermediate EFL classroom, and a commitment to developing skills for communicative language use. We hope that our faculty colleagues will have a better idea about the kind of teaching being done in EPIC from having read these articles. For a complete list of published work on materials, approaches, and research generated from the EPIC Program over the years, including the three papers published herein, see the reference list accompanying this report.

## **EPIC: From General Education Kiso English to Senmon English and Beyond**

While EPIC has gradually evolved since 2004, and is now categorized as part of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Senmon English curriculum (Senmon English I), its core features remain intact. EPIC is still considered as a ‘bridge’ program from the General Education curriculum to more specialized English language study at the faculty level. Its new home in the Senmon English curriculum is fitting, however, because EPIC itself is an intermediate to advanced-level specialized program of study, and the current ‘senmon’ designation is more representative of the content covered in EPIC courses, as well as the expectations we have from students enrolled in EPIC. With its complicated course structure, EPIC requires special consideration as a suite of six courses that must be taken as a set. Given that it is so completely different from anything else offered in the curriculum in terms of intensity and entrance requirements, and that it is often difficult to quantify its value due to limited enrollment numbers, we are grateful that the transition from General Education to the Faculty curriculum has been smooth. Only a limited number of students are able to enroll annually, but for those who do, it is a challenging and appealing curricular option. Current students still have the same specific language needs as those for whom EPIC was originally designed; it is possible to make the case that these needs may even be more pressing in the current environment.

With the EPIC Program now firmly situated as part of the faculty curriculum, each of the current EPIC teachers strongly believe that, based on its unique structure and richness of content, it should be promoted more actively to prospective students who are interested in English language study at university level. Few universities have such successful intensive language programs in place. As we consider how to further develop EPIC and English language education at the faculty level, it is also worth noting that there is currently nothing available to students upon completion of the first-semester EPIC Program. Many EPIC students have requested a second-semester EPIC incarnation so that they can continue their studies with the same degree of intensity and challenge. Such enthusiasm about EPIC from students inspires course teachers to continue on with the innovation and high-quality language pedagogy that has shaped the program since its inception.

## EPIC-related Research Activity (2004-present)

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