

The Birth and Growth of The English Education Center

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This paper describes the events leading up to the creation of the English Education Center (EEC). Also included are current events that happen in the EEC on a daily basis, as well as speculation about what the future holds in store.

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1. The Concept

When President Nakano first asked me to help him improve the English level of Baiko's students, I was not sure exactly how to make that happen. We talked about TOEIC and TOEFL scores, and shortly after we talked about me creating an "English Education Center (EEC)." I had no idea how exactly to make one, but I did not want to admit that. In the first place, he is my boss, and I have learned that you never, ever, tell your boss a direct "no," and I thought an "I do not know how" might seem similarly weak. I didn't *want* to say "I do not know." I wanted to say "I have some ideas." However, I had no ideas at that moment. I was drawing a complete blank. I had not heard of an English Education Center, and did not feel comfortable accepting that kind responsibility without having at least some minor knowledge about what I would be getting myself into. So I asked him a question in return, saying "Well, what do you think constitutes an English Education Center?" He leaned back and smiled, and we knew that we were on the right track.

At first I did not know where to start. In speaking with him, it became clear that Nakano sensei's main concern was the students—he wanted us to raise their level of English. He said it would be a good idea for me to ask MY peers and find out what things should go into a center focused on English. So I asked around and got a few ideas, but really most of the ideas are mine.

Some peers said that we should make the area "like walking into a different

country." So I have limited the amount of Japanese language media in the room. I wanted something comfortable, relaxing and welcoming. I wanted nothing that would pressure the students into trying to produce *perfect* English. I wanted to engage them, to interest them, and to entice them into exploring things using English. I think we have succeeded.

2. Physical layout

To start, we needed to change the physical layout of the room. There were two ancient computers, with very large computer desks that dominated the room. However, these computers were running on very old operating systems that took five minutes merely to turn on. They were also not at all useful for anything other than straightforward word processing. Any audio or video applications were not usable.

So I wanted the computers to go. However, I *did* still want computers—just newer, more friendly computers. Also, the computers should be positioned near the windows, away from pedestrian traffic. There also needed to be earphones for the audio applications that would be used on the English Language learning websites, particularly ello.org (which is now part of IEP Oral Communication class homework).

In the new English Education Center, there needed to be areas to both study and to relax. So there needed to be regular-sized tables and chairs, but also soft chairs with low tables. We needed access to graded readers, which meant that we needed shelves. I also had an idea for DVDs, so we needed a cabinet with a window, which could be locked. I also wanted a place for newspapers and magazines to be kept. I started thinking about what to put on the walls, and quickly realized that we have seriously limited wall space in the room. However, it started to take shape nicely.

I also needed space for my office. There was a natural place to put in a wall, and a door that could lock. There were 3 main windows on the wall, and we decided that one would be in my office and the other two in the main EEC room. That wall looked like it would cut into the heat/air conditioning unit on the ceiling, so we decided that the walls would not extend all the way up, but rather

be 'open.' I also knew that the door to my office should be in line with the door to the EEC, so students could see when I was in and available.

In my personal office, I did not require much. I only needed some large, deep shelves and a couch. Later I would add some desks (put together to form a table) and some chairs. I needed a space for serious-minded students to study, that could double as a space for private consultation/conferences. I knew that many students feel embarrassment when asking questions in front of other students, for fear of seeming stupid. We also talked about the LAN cables and outlets that needed to be added after the initial wall was built; however those were more for cosmetic purposes.

3. English Education Center Ideas

Next I had to figure out what to do inside the EEC. I wanted it to be a place to relax, but also a place to study and learn if that is what the students wanted. One idea we (foreign staff at Baiko) had conceived of and put into practice before was to incorporate a student-led short presentation, for five or ten minutes during lunchtime. Students would lead a discussion about whatever they wanted—about Australia, or about their family, or they could choose from a list of vocabulary words and idioms. So I needed to make a list of all of the Intensive English Program (IEP) students, and assign them presentation dates, and also provide a list of words that they could elect to teach if they were unable come up with another idea.

One way for students to study is to listen to music or to watch movies and television. So we wanted to make DVDs for them to borrow, and also music CDs for them to borrow and listen to. The DVD list was compiled from all of the foreign staff (we made a copy if the DVD was unplayable in Japanese DVD players). Monthly, we choose ten Western songs to feature on a CD, along with the printed lyrics for the students to borrow, or to listen to while in the EEC. Every day there is either a DVD or CD playing, usually as background noise for everyone to enjoy.

Newspapers and magazines are another way for students to use and study English. In our Social Issues and Discussion classes, we often ask the students to

bring in newspaper articles on current events for homework assignments. Students can use the magazines and newspapers in the EEC for this purpose. We started with one daily (Yomiuri) and one weekly (Japan Times Weekly) newspaper, but changed the latter after a few months. Recently we also added two more 'graded' magazines (graded meaning the content, vocabulary and grammar are not at the native level) that highlight celebrities, movies, and other current events.

One of the main focus points of the EEC is the library of graded reading books. Most publishers have 5 or 6 different levels of readers, ranging from very easy manga-style to almost native text. We started off with about 75 Oxford University Publications graded readers and about 20 Penguin Readers, but at present now have over 330 books from 8 different publishers. For a while we struggled with space (where to put them), but two publishers (Oxford and Penguin) were nice enough to supply us with dumpbins, and since the majority of our books are from these two publishers, the problem has temporarily been alleviated. We encourage the students to try books from different publishers and, to gain a sense of the merits of each type.

We have encouraged the foreign faculty to have their office hours in the English Education Center. We also asked some Japanese staff to do likewise, but that was met with little result. Most of the foreign staff hold their office hours in the EEC, making it easier for students to have access to them.

On the fourth floor of the main building is the computer center, complete with the E-learning Center. Students can go there for TOEFL and TOEIC help. They can write essays using the Criterion system and its feedback. However, students consistently borrow both TOEIC and TOEFL books from the EEC as well. We encourage them to study, and give various methods for them to do that.

Two ideas that have really taken off and seem to be working well are the English advisor and English SENPAI supporter systems. Each first year student has two additional 'helpers' to turn to for English help. The first is a native speaker. Most of the foreign staff have either ten or twenty students that they meet with (in groups, pairs, or individually) once a month. The other helper is a top level third year student. Each third year student has between three and five

KOUHAI that they meet with at least once a month. This was designed for the first year students to have access to help from both native speakers and from knowledgeable third year students. The groups of first year students are chosen so that each advisor or SENPAI has first year students with varying ability (some taken from the top group, middle group and lower level group).

4. How is it all working?

Most of the ideas we have implemented in the EEC have taken off and have no signs of stopping. There have been a few hiccups along the way, but for the most part we're very satisfied with how things have gone.

The lunchtime presentations are proceeding. We really want the students to do more, and to take more initiative, but the overwhelming majority of them simply have no desire to do that. Initially we have the students in pairs, and we tell them that they may lead the discussion about anything they want. We tell them that they should come prepared, because it is a small part of their oral communication grade. We also have a list of vocabulary words or idioms that they may choose from if they cannot come up with an idea themselves. However, in the past 8 months, every student has chosen words from the list instead of using their own imagination. I do not want to guess about the reasons behind this reluctance.

The lunchtime presentations are getting better in one facet: the presenters are getting better at involving the audience. Or rather, since most of the audience are students that attend daily, perhaps they have become accustomed to involving themselves in the presentation, often by volunteering to use the word of the day in a sentence that they create on the spot.

The newspapers are being used. We started off with a daily paper (*Yomiuri daily*) and a weekly paper (*Japan Times Weekly*). However, the weekly paper was rarely perused. When asked about this, some frequent users of the EEC said that it was too difficult to read and understand without the assistance of a dictionary. In summer, we switched from the *Japan Times Weekly* to the *Student Weekly*, which is much more user friendly for non-native users. Both weekly periodicals had some Japanese translations, but the *Student Weekly* has many more, plus 'fun'

activities involving celebrity news, movies and TOEIC hints. This paper is being read by students with much more regularity.

The monthly movie night has also been somewhat successful. The promotions for it are very light, perhaps leading to sparse attendance. Most of the attendees are members of the English Speaking Society (ESS). We hold this movie night in conjunction with the ESS club, tasking them with public relations and choosing the movie to be shown, while the faculty prepares the physical room and provides refreshments. Movie night is held once a month.

We have recently ordered more TOEFL texts, as the number of students requesting TOEFL help has increased rapidly. We try to have books that cover all four skills, but we also have separate books emphasizing each skill individually. We also have a few lists of sample speaking questions that the students can look at. The logistics of setting up meetings with first year students was not easy. We had to get their email addresses, and send them messages. We tried to find a time when all of them could meet. Again, this was aimed at providing access to help should the students desire it. Of course there are always some students that are not interested in getting any help, and they are therefore unavailable for contact. Despite repeated attempts, some students have never replied to either their advisor or their SENPAI. Other students show up for the required meeting but don't approach either helper outside of those meetings. However, probably half of the first year students enjoy it and are taking better advantage of it. We had thought that at the very least, the students would know the teacher/SENPAI outside of class, and thus feel less reluctant about approaching them. This appears to be the case. Most of the SENPAI and advisors have one or two students who not only greet them when running into them by accident, but actually ask for more frequent meetings.

5. What problems does the EEC present?

There have not been many problems with the EEC. The main problem is that it is time consuming. I now have very little time for preparation for my own classes. I used to be able to do a majority of my preparation between classes during my 'free' hours, but now there are always either students to talk to or

help, or there are EEC activities that require my attention (numbering/filing new DVDs for students, making CDs, making lyrics, organizing books, magazines and newspapers, general cleaning of the area, making sure the bulletin board is updated, etc.) One foreign faculty has let it be known that they are too busy to participate in the EEC activities. I am also incredibly busy. In addition to my own advisees, I now have the extra students (advisees) that others were too busy to attend to. I had been told that the number of classes that I teach could be reduced in the future, but that did not happen (but I am still hopeful for the future). Really the main problem is the time consuming nature of it all.

Another problem is with the daily lunchtime student presentations. As mentioned before, the students are not showing much initiative. We have many ideas for how to improve the presentations, but all of them have been labor-intensive for the students, and have thus failed. The problem is coming up with an activity that the students need to do a bit of preparation for, but to make it attractive enough that the students will willingly and adequately prepare. More than half of the presenters either don't show up at all, or give a very haphazard presentation that is difficult for everyone to take in.

Students are starting to peruse the magazines more. The reason behind this remains a mystery, but it could be that a) the students are interested in improving their English, b) they enjoy the new graded magazines, c) they like hanging out in the EEC and it gives them something to do, or d) recent movies like *Twilight* or musical artists like Lady Gaga are featured in the magazines, which are thus more appealing than newspapers alone. Higher level students look at *People Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly* often, and a few students look at *National Geographic* each month as well. The newspapers are sporadically read, much the same as how they would be in English speaking countries.

6. What new things are going to happen in the future in the EEC? Odds and Ends

We do not have many concrete things to add to the EEC at the moment. Recently we polled students in Reading and Vocabulary or Reading and Writing classes about their favorite graded readers, and have tallied up their responses. Soon we

will communicate this information to the students to help them in choosing their books. We have some other ideas floating about, but nothing substantial at the moment. We have one last load of graded readers and TOEFL books coming soon, and we are still hoping for a nicer television.

We want to have more study abroad information too. We are thinking of having returnees (students who have studied abroad in Australia and The United States) give a lunchtime speech at some point. However, we are still debating the most effective method (i.e. instead of a traditional 'lecture,' we may prepare the returnees by giving them in advance a list of questions from the attending students to answer). We would also like to have some information available for students to look at (pictures, summaries, etc.) from those study abroad experiences. Another idea is to record some of the lunchtime presentations. We have not done this yet, but it should be done soon and should be easy enough to do. There are many more DVDs that we have, but have yet to convert to region-free DVDs. It is time consuming, but not difficult.

The EEC is alive and thriving. Students use the EEC all the time, as it contains aspects that appeal to different individual tastes. There have been some hiccups, but the present looks great, and the future even better.