Teaching academic communicative English at university: 
Background principles of language education

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Introduction
University of Niigata Prefecture will be established in spring 2009. Its curriculum emphasizes English education and starts an English program named ACE (Academic Communicative English) after its main characteristics. This paper examines key concepts of background principles related with the program.

Meaning-focused approach
Our program aims to cover both academic and interpersonal competences1, two fundamental types of communicative competence (Saville-Troike, 2006, pp. 135–136). English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a term applied to courses “in which students are taught to deal with academically related language and subject matter” (Brown, 2007, p. 143). EAP has been a prerequisite for international students to enter colleges or universities in English-speaking countries, but nowadays it has also become a prerequisite for domestic students to take English-taught courses as it is happening in European higher education2 (Wächter, 2008). In other words, EAP has become one kind of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in a broader sense.

For our program to achieve its aim, a meaning-focused approach such as task-based language teaching seems well suited. A task-based approach “focuses sharply on language as a meaning system” (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 179). Thus learners' needs are reflected in the design of the curriculum. The emphasis varies according to the learner's level. See Figure 1. At the beginner/elementary level, the communicative module prevails but students still can use English in meaning-focused activities. As the level advances, there will be more form-focused activities. For example, content-based courses can be used for more advanced learners of English. Willis & Willis (2007) includes a sample task-based course plan, “English and global issues,” drafted by Lorie Wood as Appendix 5 (pp. 255–258).

1 Academic competence is "the knowledge needed by learners who want to use the L2 to learn about other subjects, or as a tool in scholarly research, or as a medium in a specific professional or occupational field." and interpersonal competence is the "knowledge required of learners who plan to use the L2 primarily in face-to-face contact with other speakers.

2 According to the 2007 survey. students enrolled in English-taught programs are, in the majority, foreigners in their country of study (65%), up from 60 percent in the 2002 surveys. Domestic students, with an overall share of 35 percent, tend to concentrate in bachelor's programs, where they make up more than half of all students.
Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

Task-based language teaching, according to Brown (2007, p.50), is one of the most prominent perspectives within the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework. Brown reviews characteristics of TBLT as follows:

- Tasks ultimately point learners beyond the forms of languages alone to real-world contexts
- Tasks specifically contribute to communicative goals
- Their elements are carefully designed and not simply haphazardly or idiosyncratically thrown together.
- Their objectives are well specified so that you can at some later point accurately determine the success of one task over another.
- Tasks engage learners, at some level, in genuine problem-solving activity.

A task-based lesson consists of a sequence of tasks, not just a single task. It is initiated with pre-task priming activities, followed by a task (including planning a report and reporting back), form-focus activities, and task repetition and/or evaluation (Willis & Willis, 2007, Appendix 4, pp. 253–254). Focus on form comes at the end of the sequence.

Why not start with grammar?

Willis & Willis (2007) answer to this question in two ways.

First, “it is extremely difficult [for learners] to concentrate on what they are going to say and at the same time on how we are going to say it” (p.17). They think the benefits of focus on meaning must not be lost, so focus on form comes after focus on meaning. In a focus on meaning session, learners are involved in communication. During such an activity, learners may pause to think to find better expressions for what they want to say, or a teacher might take part in the interaction and rephrase learner language. This is called a focus on language, distinguished from a focus on form, “in which one or more lexical or grammatical forms are isolated and specified for study, or in which the teacher comments on student language by drawing attention to problems” (p.5).

Second, the traditional language-based syllabus is based on the assumptions “that language learning is additive, that we acquire one form, then move on to the next which is mastered in turn, and so on,” but language learning is a dynamic system much more complicated than this. Learners are not simply acquiring language forms but learning to put them to use (pp.177–178). Vocabulary, tasks and grammar have to be integrated into
syllabus to help learners engaged in constructing a usable language system (pp. 192 –193). The same reasoning is stated by Lightbown and Spada (2006) as follows:

Some structure-based approaches to teaching are based on the false assumption that second language development is a sort of accumulation of rules. . . . This isolated presentation and practice of one structure at a time does not provide learners with an opportunity to discover how different language features compare and contrast in normal language use. It is also likely that, without opportunities to continue hearing, seeing, and using them, the language features learned in the first unit will have been forgotten long before the last. (p. 189)

Learner autonomy and intercultural communication

Some features that had already been introduced to our junior college English curriculum will be reinforced in the ACE program. The integrated English teaching model with the focus on motivation regarded learner autonomy and intercultural communication as essential components (Fukushima, 2008). The ACE program has classes named Effective Learning, in which students learn about strategies and skills of language learning. The self access learning center (SALC) and computer-assisted learning laboratory (CALL) will be ready for use, and the students will be encouraged to study autonomously outside class using materials at the SALC and network-based language learning (NBLL). The SALC will also be utilized as a special venue for intercultural communication using English. Study Abroad courses will be maintained and expanded to serve eager students who want to spend time abroad and have authentic intercultural experiences.

Whole language approach

There has been a recent trend of skill integration, which advocates teaching interrelated skills in a whole language approach. Task-based instruction and content-based instruction (described above) are models of such integration (Brown, 2007, pp. 286–288). The ACE program has the main components such as Core English (meet twice a week), Writing, and Speaking as required classes for all students at the new university. Core English is a typical skill-integrated class. So are Writing and Speaking though the main focus might be on a designated skill. For International Studies and Regional Development majors, Lecture and Effective Learning I are added as required classes. Lecture is closely connected with Core English classes and specifically devoted to preparation for taking Englisht-taught classes. This leads to experiences of academic kinds of real-world English.

References
http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/Number52/p3_Wachtler.htm
Willis, D. & Willis, J. 2007. Doing Task-based