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メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2021-06-21 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Janjua, Najma メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://kagawa-puhs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/292">https://kagawa-puhs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/292</a>

# Learning English in Health Sciences through Cocurricular Activities

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## Abstract

Despite Japanese ministry of education's goal to cultivate Japanese who can use English in their work, most Japanese universities offer no specific courses to teach specialized English in their health sciences disciplines. In the absence of necessary instruction as a part of curricular studies, opportunities for students to learn English language of their future profession outside the classroom setting can be valuable. This paper describes a case where students at a Japanese health sciences college had an opportunity to learn English in their field of study through a cocurricular lecture held on the campus. The case suggests that while such cocurricular activities cannot be a complete substitute for a more thorough classroom based instruction of specialized English, they can play an important role in exposing the students to English language related to their discipline and at the same time help create interest and motivation in them for further study of the language.

**Key Words:** Japanese universities, specialized English, health sciences, nursing, curriculum, cocurricular

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## Introduction

In March 2003, Japanese ministry of education put forward an action plan to cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”<sup>1)</sup>. Among the goals specified in the plan was one that concerned English language abilities required for specialized fields: “On graduating from university, graduates can use English in their work.”<sup>1)</sup> Ironically, however, seven years after the action plan was put forward, not much has changed on the specialized English language education scene of Japanese universities, particularly in the area of health sciences. Still, no concrete curriculum exists at the nation’s colleges and universities to provide essential English proficiency skills to students enrolled in their health sciences programs<sup>2, 3)</sup>. As a result, graduates completing the programs lag far behind the ministry’s goal of Japanese university graduates being able to use “English in their work.”<sup>1)</sup>

Under such a background of deficient specialized English language learning environment at Japanese universities, opportunities for students to learn the language relevant to their fields of study and future professions outside the classroom, can play an important role in filling the gap in their educational upbringing. Furthermore, if such opportunities are educationally stimulating and enjoyable, they can generate interest and motivation in the students for further study of the language. The present paper describes a cocurricular educational lecture held at a Japanese health sciences college that helped to serve this purpose. The paper relates how the lecture was tailored to the needs of the students and how it provided a unique opportunity for them to learn English language in their area of study outside the typical classroom setting.

### The cocurricular educational lecture

#### 1. Background

Cocurricular activities are school-based or school-sponsored activities that are not part of the regular curriculum<sup>4)</sup>. Their purpose is to enrich and extend the classroom education. The cocurricular educational lecture described in the present paper was held at the Kagawa Prefectural University of Health Sciences and was sponsored by its Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences. It was one of several public lectures held on the university

campus each academic year. The lectures are usually on topics of general interest and are targeted toward the students and/or the faculty and in some cases toward the general public. Until the present case, the lectures had always been given by Japanese speakers and had all been conducted in Japanese including the question and answer sessions.

#### 2. The present lecture

The cocurricular lecture described in the present paper was given by a visiting US state court judge and was delivered all in English. It was the first public lecture held on the campus given by a non-Japanese speaker and in a language other than Japanese. The lecture was made possible through collaboration with a sister-city friendship association between the local Japanese town where the university is located and a US city<sup>5)</sup>. The title of the lecture was “Healthcare and legal issues in the United States”. This title was chosen in view of the academic and professional qualifications of the speaker and in order to tailor the lecture to the needs of the attending students who as described in the subsequent section were all enrolled in programs leading to degrees in healthcare professions.

The lecture duration was 60 minutes including the question and answer time. It was delivered in an interactive manner whereby the speaker and the audience could communicate with each other throughout the lecture. English-Japanese and Japanese-English interpretation was provided for questions and answers as necessary. An outline of the lecture showing the main points covered is given in Table 1.

#### 3. Students

The lecture was targeted toward the freshman class in the 4 year undergraduate program of the health sciences faculty of the university. The class comprised of a total of 90 students of which 70 were nursing majors and 20 medical technology majors (with actual attendance numbers being 68 and 18, respectively, due to 2 absentees in each group).

#### 4. Pre-lecture briefing

Students were briefed about the lecture a week in advance. This included telling them about the speaker, the lecture title and its meaning in Japanese, and an introduction to some basic English vocabulary in the area of healthcare and law. In addition, students were asked to write down ahead of the lecture any questions related to the lecture topic that they might want to ask the speaker. A list

of ten typical questions (unedited) that the students wrote in English is given in Table 2.

### 5. Post-lecture survey

After the lecture, a survey of the class was taken where students were asked to respond to the following three questions as YES or NO in a written questionnaire:

Q1. From the lecture, did you learn something new about healthcare and legal issues?

Q2. From the lecture, did you learn any new English words about healthcare and legal issues?

Q3. Do you think that a lecture like this can help you to learn English for health sciences?

Students were told verbally that purpose of the survey was to evaluate educational efficacy of the lecture and aid in future planning of such events on the campus.

Of the 79 students who submitted the completed questionnaires, 78 (99%) answered YES to Q1; 68 (86%) answered YES to Q2; and 77 (97%) answered

YES to Q3. The one student who responded NO to Q1 nevertheless responded YES to Q2. All 11 students who responded NO to Q2 answered YES to Q1. Of the two students who gave a NO for Q3, one responded YES to both Qs 1&2 and one responded YES to Q2. None of the students responded NO to all three questions, whereas 84% (66/79) said YES to all three questions.

In addition to the above three questions, the survey also asked the students to write their general impression of the lecture in up to 50 words. Ten typical impressions (unedited) written in Japanese by the students are listed in Table 3 together with their English translation.

## Discussion

The small but significant educational event reported here emphasizes the importance of cocurricular activities that can contribute to

**Table 1. An outline of the lecture on health care and legal issues in the United States**

Main Points	
I . WHAT IS THE COMMON-LAW?	IV . WHO DECIDES WHAT THE STANDARD OF CARE IS?
II . WHAT IS MEDICAL MALPRACTICE?	V . INSURANCE, INSURANCE, INSURANCE
III . WHAT PROFESSIONAL DUTY IS DUE?	VI . IS THERE A MEDICAL MALPRACTICE CRISIS?

**Table 2. Ten typical questions written in English by the students in advance of the lecture**

Students' questions (unedited)
1. Is the number of nurses enough?
2. Do you accept cerebral death?
3. How is legal issues about death with dignity in the USA?
4. I would like to know about medical expenses.
5. What are the difference about healthcare and legal issues between Japan and USA?
6. We have "Universal Health Insurance Coverage". Is it possible to be realized "Universal Health Insurance Coverage" in USA?
7. I would like to know how to deal with brain death in USA.
8. I would like to know about the difference between healthcare and legal issues in the USA and it in the Japan.
9. I would like to know about brain death, organ transplants, insurance, euthanasia, a human killing and artificial insemination in the USA.
10. In the USA, what is the disease with a high degree of fatality?

**Table 3. Ten typical impressions written in Japanese by the students after the lecture**

Students' impressions (unedited) (with English translation in brackets)	
1.	<p>看護師を目指す私たちにとってとてもためになる講義だったと思う。もっと法律について学び、世界の医療についてもっと知りたいと思った。</p> <p>(I thought that it was a very useful lecture for us who aim at being nurses. It made me want to learn more about law and global healthcare.)</p>
2.	<p>アメリカにおける医療と法律問題について話を聞いて日本とどんな違いがあるかよく分かった。制度が違うと状況もかなり変わるということが分かった。他の国のいい所を日本も見習って日本の医療も良くなればいいと思った。</p> <p>(After hearing the lecture on American healthcare and legal issues, I understood well the differences between Japan and America in this area. I understood that when the systems are different, the conditions are considerably different too. I felt that Japanese medicine could improve by following the good aspects of other countries.)</p>
3.	<p>とても興味深い内容だったので話を聞くことができてよかった。このような機会はなかなかないのでよかった。</p> <p>(Because its content was very interesting, it is good that we could hear the lecture. It was good also because we usually do not have such a chance readily available.)</p>
4.	<p>アメリカの医療について知らなかったので今回話を聞いてとても勉強になりました。アメリカの医療について興味を持てたので自分でも調べたり勉強したいと思いました。</p> <p>(Because I did not know about healthcare in the United States, I learned a lot from this lecture. Also I became interested in American healthcare and felt like studying about it on my own too.)</p>
5.	<p>アメリカにおける医療と法律問題についての講義を聞いて、これはアメリカだけでなく、日本にも深く関わる内容なので、しっかりと考える必要がある内容だと思いました。</p> <p>(I thought that the content of the lecture required serious thinking because it was related deeply not only with the United States but also Japan.)</p>
6.	<p>アメリカは、数多くの面で日本よりも優れた医療技術をもっているのです。そのような国の医療の講義は興味深かったです。</p> <p>(Because medical technology in the United States is superior to Japan in a lot of respects, listening to a lecture on healthcare of such a country was very interesting.)</p>
7.	<p>日本とアメリカにおける医療と法律は異なる部分もあった。いくつかの法律問題の事例を挙げて、私たちに考える場面を与えて下さったり、いろいろな考え方を紹介して下さいたり、分かりやすい講義内容だった。</p> <p>(There are differences between Japan and the United States in healthcare and legal issues. The lecturer presented us with situations to think about and introduced various ways of thinking by giving several examples of legal issues. It was an easy to understand lecture.)</p>
8.	<p>話を聞いて、アメリカの医療や法律について学ぶことができました。また、日本との違いについても知ることができ、とても勉強になりました。</p> <p>(By listening to the talk, I was able to learn about healthcare and law in the United States. Moreover, I could know about differences between the United States and Japan. I learned a lot from the lecture.)</p>
9.	<p>「アメリカにおける医療と法律問題」について真剣にお話をしてくれました。分からない単語がたくさん出てきたけれど、先生の熱意が伝わってきて、法律問題にも興味を持つことができ、良い経験になりました。</p> <p>(The lecturer talked earnestly about "Healthcare and legal issues in the United States". Although there were many words that I did not understand, the presenter's zeal was conveyed and I could get interested in legal issues as well. It became a good experience.)</p>
10.	<p>医療と法律の問題を考えることはしばしばあるが、海外との比較をしたりするということはなかなかない。新たな見聞の幅を広げるには良い試みだと思います。</p> <p>(Although we often think about healthcare and legal issues in Japan, comparing the Japanese situation with that abroad is an opportunity not readily available. I think that it was a new and good attempt to broaden our experience.)</p>

students' knowledge and skills required for their future profession. It shows that when the curriculum lacks a specific course of study, the deficiency may be made up at least partially through cocurricular learning experiences outside the classroom.

Cocurricular activities in general are known to have a positive influence on students' academic accomplishments<sup>6, 7)</sup>. Academic-related student clubs such as history club, debating club, science club and foreign languages club, all support curricular achievements of students<sup>8)</sup>. The language-related clubs enable students to apply their thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking and listening depending on the nature and purpose of the club<sup>8)</sup>. Most cocurricular student activities, however, including those that are language-related, are general in nature. While these activities support the academic performance of the students overall, they are not connected directly to any one particular aspect of their curricular studies. The cocurricular learning experience reported in the present paper on the other hand was related more directly with the students' required course of study, namely, English for health sciences. Therefore, the experience may be regarded even more beneficial than the conventional cocurricular activities. As indicated by the results of the post-lecture survey, most students said that from the lecture they learned new English words about healthcare and legal issues and all except one stated that they learned something new about the subject.

Japanese college freshmen are well known to have minimal oral communication competency in English<sup>9)</sup>. However, the list of questions written by the students (Table 1) shows that the students did indeed have the ability to formulate ideas and put them down in writing even when their listening and speaking abilities were limited. Moreover, it suggests that such cocurricular activities can help to build up on the students' basic knowledge of English through increasing their vocabulary and giving them an opportunity to put their ideas in the form of sentences. Still more, students' questions written prior to and impressions given after the lecture, are indicative of their interest in the topic and motivation to learn more about it. This may be attributed to the fact that the theme of students' language learning activity was related to their own future profession. In other words, the problems that they were thinking and writing about were the

ones that they themselves are likely to face in the future. This is especially reflected by comment 1 in Table 3 where the student states (as translated into English) the following: "I thought that it was a very useful lecture for us who aim at being nurses. It made me want to learn more about law and global healthcare."

In the present case of the cocurricular educational lecture, the lecture itself was delivered by a foreign speaker and on a subject concerning a foreign country both of which added an international dimension to the event. This aspect of the lecture, made the experience additionally interesting for the students since knowing and learning about the state of affairs of a foreign country can be appealing to young learners particularly when the topic is related to their own field of study. Indeed many of the students' comments reflect their interest in the lecture stemming from the fact that it gave them an opportunity to compare healthcare and legal issues between Japan and the United States (see comments 2,5,7,8,10 in Table<sup>3)</sup>.

The international facet of the lecture also made the experience worthwhile pedagogically. An important goal of present day higher education is to raise individuals who are culturally competent and have the ability to interact with people from different backgrounds<sup>9)</sup>. Toward this goal, an international learning environment can serve to expose the students to diverse and multiple perspectives and thereby promote their intellectual and personal development<sup>10)</sup>. As one student wrote (comment 10, Table 3), "I think that it was a new and good attempt to broaden our experience."

Despite all the educational benefits of the cocurricular lecture reported in the present paper, however, it is important to bear in mind that such activities cannot be a substitute for a more thorough and comprehensive study as a part of the curriculum<sup>11)</sup>. They can be beneficial only as adjuncts to classroom based instruction. Thus, while the lecture described here may fill the gap in the students' specialized English education partially, it does not exclude the need for a complete and thorough curricular course of study in specialized English for health sciences. Therefore, it is necessary to institute in the regular curriculum of Japanese health sciences universities, courses that can equip the students with English language skills related to their study majors<sup>12, 13)</sup>. In the present age of

globalization, the need for healthcare professionals, no matter where in the world they work, to be able to communicate in the global language of science is undisputed<sup>14)</sup>. Japanese ministry of education must recognize this need and implement measures to realize its goal of cultivating Japanese who “can use English in their work”<sup>1)</sup>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the cocurricular lecture reported here in the area of health sciences can be said to have made a small but significant contribution to the students’ knowledge of English language as related to their field of study. The lecture and its outcome suggest that although such cocurricular activities may not be a substitute for a full and comprehensive classroom instruction in specialized English, they can play an important role in filling in, at least partially, the gap in students’ education created by a deficient curriculum. At the same time, they can serve to create interest and motivation in the students for further study of the language.

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## 要旨

文部科学省の事業として、「英語が使える日本人」を育成する目標を挙げているにもかかわらず、日本のほとんどの大学は、健康科学の分野において専門英語を教えるための特定のコースを提供していない。カリキュラム上で、必要な専門英語教育が不足している場合、学生にとって、将来の職業関連の英語を教室の外で学ぶ機会は貴重である。本論文は、日本の健康科学系大学の学生が、カリキュラム外で講演を受け専門英語を学ぶ機会があった例を報告する。結果として、今回報告した講演のような教室外での活動は教室内での徹底的な専門英語教育の代わりにはならないが、学生が専門及び将来の職業に関する英語に触れるために重要な役割を果たすと同時に英語の勉強に関心を持ち、動機付けとなることを示した。

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受付日 2010年10月15日

受理日 2010年12月21日