

Designing and developing a blended course: toward best practices for Japanese learners

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Abstract. This paper outlines the iterative stages involved in designing and developing a blended course of English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) at Osaka University. First, the basic Successive Approximation Model (SAM 1) is introduced as the guiding instructional design model upon which the course was created. Afterward, the stages of design and development of the blended course are explained with a focus upon assessing Japanese students' English language needs and their e-learning readiness. Additional points discussed include the way in which the iteration process has allowed for the discovery of some opportunities and problems at the early phases of the blended course design and development, and the refinements that were made to enhance opportunities and to mitigate the difficulties.

Keywords: blended course design and development, successive approximation model, quality assurance.

1. Introduction

In response to the government's drive to increase the use of technology in education, such as 'i-Japan Strategy 2015', and as a commitment to meeting the 21st century needs of students, such as flexibility and autonomy, an increasing number of Japanese universities have gained pace in adopting online and blended learning in recent years. With regard to English Language Teaching (ELT), a range of online English courses, from fully online to blended, have been recently offered at higher education institutions in Japan. As distance learning grows in popularity,

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quality assurance becomes more paramount. In order to offer successful online/blended courses, it is necessary to know how to ensure the quality of the course through careful planning and ongoing evaluation in the process of online/blended learning design and development. Following SAM 1, the purpose of this paper is thus to outline the iterative stages involved in designing and developing a blended course for Japanese learners of English and to serve as a practical model for future online instructional designers.

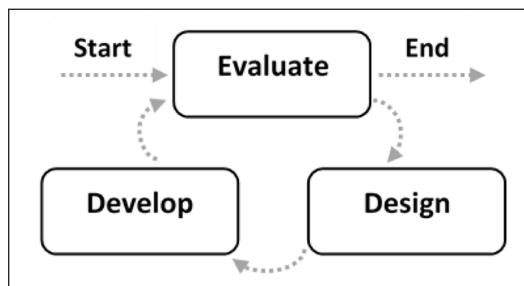
2. Osaka University Global English Online (OUGEO)

Under the project title of OUGEO, a blended course of EGAP was designed and developed at Osaka University targeting second-year undergraduate students from the Faculties of Law, Economics, and Letters for a period of 15 weeks, during which ten sessions were purely online and five were face-to-face.

3. SAM 1

SAM 1, proposed by [Allen \(2012\)](#), was selected as the guiding instructional design model upon which the course was created. The first reason we opted for this model was that it is an improvement over earlier models of instructional design, such as the ADDIE model ([Branson et al., 1975](#)). The latter consists of five discrete stages of Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation sequenced in a linear fashion and described as a waterfall approach ([Allen, 2012](#)), whereas SAM 1 not only allows for, but also necessitates, iteration. In addition, it is a more appropriate choice for smaller projects where an individual or a small team are involved in the process of instructional design. [Figure 1](#) depicts the basic iterative process in SAM 1.

Figure 1. SAM 1



4. Designing and developing OUGEO using SAM 1

In the following, the agile process of designing and developing OUGEO based on SAM 1 is described. It is worth emphasizing that the design and development process was iterative, and frequent course corrections and modifications were conducted on the basis of ongoing evaluation.

4.1. Start

The first step in this process was to conduct a meticulous review of standard checklists for online course design and development. One useful resource was the checklist provided by [Vai and Sosulski \(2011, pp. 189-195\)](#), which is a reader-friendly guide on the basics of online course design and includes a detailed list of criteria to consider when designing and developing an online course. The second major resource used was the Higher Ed Course Design Rubric developed by Quality Matters, which can be used for the design of fully online and blended courses. We also created a Google Site for OUGEO (<https://sites.google.com/view/ougeo>) where we could document everything and keep track of all the procedures involved in course design and development.

4.2. Evaluate

At this stage, we carried out a detailed analysis of the situation by identifying the prospective learners, their overall language skills, their difficulties, needs and wants, as well as their level of computer literacy and e-learning readiness. In order to delve into learner needs, wants, and difficulties, we conducted a language needs analysis study with a sample of 278 Japanese undergraduate students and with 12 English instructors ([Alizadeh, Mehran, Koguchi, & Takemura, 2017](#)). The results of this survey study indicated that Japanese learners struggled the most with English pronunciation, listening, and speaking; thus, the aforementioned skills need to be further emphasized in the OUGEO course. Furthermore, some students wished to improve their conversational English whereas others aimed at developing their academic English skills. Consequently, the initial hypothesis that the course had to be offered at more than one level was confirmed. Therefore, we set out to offer the course at three levels (from B1 up to C1, according to Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) to accommodate varying proficiency levels.

In another attempt to evaluate the e-learning readiness of the target group of learners, an e-readiness assessment study was conducted where the participants

were asked to self-report their skills in performing basic to advanced user tasks when using computers and mobile devices (Mehran, Alizadeh, Koguchi, & Takemura, 2017). The findings of this study showed that some students needed training with certain aspects of technology use. Therefore, we decided to create tutorials which would help the less tech-savvy students with fulfilling the technological requirements of the course.

4.3. Design

Based on the results of the initial evaluation and with consideration of Japan's current efforts at globalization, the course's overall goals, learning objectives, and learning outcomes were determined, and a multidimensional syllabus, i.e. an amalgamation of skill-based syllabus and task-based syllabus (available at <https://sites.google.com/view/ougeo/syllabus>), was designed with the aim of increasing motivation and global awareness among Japanese learners of English.

For materials development, copyright issues had to first be addressed. Hence, through educational portals such as MERLOT, Open Educational Resources (OERs) for ELT were found, and a number of them were selected (e.g. <http://ello.org> for listening and English Kickstart for pronunciation). Permission was taken from the owner of Breaking News English (<http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/>) to use reading lessons from the website.

Other resources (e.g. TED Talks) were cited appropriately and linked back to their websites. The course calendar for all the online and face-to-face sessions (available at <https://sites.google.com/view/ougeo/course-calendar>) was then written in detail, and afterwards course tasks, activities, quizzes, tutorials, and rubrics for writing and speaking assignments were prepared.

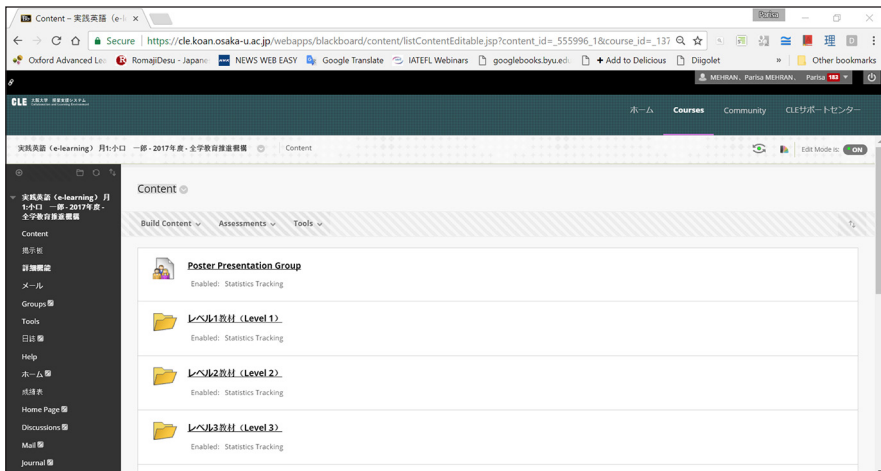
It is worth mentioning that the speaking and writing tasks were designed to foster global understanding, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity by the use of online affordances, and the term project (i.e. poster presentation, delivered face-to-face) was defined as a group activity through which the students could broaden their global perspectives as well as their digital literacy by exploring augmented reality technology.

4.4. Develop

At the development stage, the sketches created at the design phase were prototyped. Several e-learning content authoring tools (e.g. Adobe Captivate) were used to

digitize the instructional materials, and a sample week was demoed at a Faculty Development (FD) seminar at the English Department of Osaka University. Meanwhile, the stage for online course delivery was set by uploading the course content on Collaboration and Learning Environment (CLE), the commercial learning management system Blackboard to which Osaka University has subscribed since 2005 (see Figure 2). The test delivery was also done to check the quality of the content on Blackboard mobile applications (Blackboard Mobile Learn™ and Bb Student).

Figure 2. A screenshot of OUGEO on CLE



This stage involved iterative review cycles to evaluate, refine, and modify the previous process. For instance, course labeling decisions were changed from ‘week by week’ to ‘level by level’. Due to incompatibility, it was decided to upload the instructional materials on CLE without digitizing them via e-authoring tools. Based on the feedback from the FD seminar demonstration, some modifications were also made to the course learning objectives and the related materials and tasks by adding global issues.

4.5. End

After prototyping and applying the changes, OUGEO was implemented in the spring semester of 2017 (April–July). The iterative evaluation continued, and some minor modifications were applied during the implementation phase, such as adding Japanese translations to the course instructions.

5. Conclusion

As a pioneering attempt at the in-house design and development of a blended course of EGAP at Osaka University, adopting SAM 1 as our instructional design model aided us in smoothly moving along the iterative cycle of evaluation, design, and development while leaving room throughout the entire process for the consideration of context-relevant factors and the characteristics particular to Japanese learners of English.

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