

Bridging the Gap:
Developing Required English Proficiency in Future Teachers

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教員に求められる英語力の獲得を目指して

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Abstract

This study examines the pedagogical interventions implemented at a teacher training institution to enhance prospective teachers' English proficiency. Since English language education was introduced into elementary schools, teachers have been expected to develop English skills to effectively teach the subject. However, our diagnostic assessment revealed a significant discrepancy between the target proficiency level and the participants' current proficiency levels. To bridge this gap, an experimental, collaborative approach was implemented in a foreign language course at this institution. The results demonstrated an increase in the participants' sense of achievement and confidence in using English, indicating the effectiveness of this approach. This paper critically analyzes the outcomes of the intervention and discusses their implications for English language programs in pre-service teacher education contexts, with the aim of equipping future teachers with the English language proficiency required for their professional roles.

【Key words】 English Proficiency for Elementary School Teachers, Pre-service Teacher Education, Core Curriculum, Integrated Skills Instruction

1. Introduction

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the goal of university English education is to “develop English proficiency that can be used after entering the workforce” (MEXT, 2003). At the institution under study—a university with exceptional teacher employment rates where more than half of its graduates become elementary school teachers—ensuring that students acquire adequate English proficiency to conduct elementary English lessons has become a critical pedagogical

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imperative.

This study, therefore, identifies the English proficiency requirements for teachers and examines students' current proficiency in light of these standards. To ensure that students meet these standards, the foreign language programs at the institution have been examined for potential revision. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of theoretical foundations, methodological considerations, and preliminary survey results from the 2024 academic year (AY). Based on these findings, a revised curriculum for AY 2025 will be designed with the intention of developing communicative competence among prospective teachers to improve English language instruction at the elementary school level.

2. Background and Context

2.1 Instructional Setting and Student Profile

At the institution under study, first-year students are divided into four homeroom classes and enroll in two required foreign language courses: "Oral English," which focuses on listening and speaking, and "Comprehensive English," which includes reading comprehension, writing skills, and grammatical knowledge. This mixed-ability configuration, which differs significantly from proficiency-based grouping, has generally been well received by students, who note that they can "learn from those who excel in English" and benefit from "a comfortable environment for learning a foreign language". (2023 "Oral English" student enrollment survey)

Students' proficiency levels show considerable variation; while the majority of students demonstrate moderate English language proficiency, a few students who aspire to become secondary school English language teachers demonstrate advanced language proficiency. To assess student performance, TOEFL Junior assessment scores administered from AY 2021 to 2023 were used and categorized according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment) scale as a reference (see Table 1). Although the AY 2022 data indicate higher performance, student proficiency levels remain relatively consistent across academic years. The AY 2021 and 2023 data are, therefore, considered to represent the typical student proficiency profile.

Table 1: English Proficiency Profile of First-year Students (Based on TOEFL Junior)

AY (Test Date)		2021 (22/01/19)	2022 (23/01/18)	2023 (24/01/17)
CEFR (TOEFL Jr score)	A2 (<744)	52.4%	12.9%	51.5%
	B1 (745-849)	47.6%	85.1%	48.5%
	B2 (850-900)	0.0%	2.0%	0.0%

To interpret these data, it is important to acknowledge two aspects: 1) the TOEFL Junior assessments primarily evaluate grammar, vocabulary, and reading/listening comprehension, but not speaking skills; 2) the official TOEFL Junior assessments only evaluate proficiency from CEFR A2 to B2, which means that they do not assess students with C1 or higher proficiency levels, nor those at A1 or below.

2.2 English Proficiency Requirements for Teachers

Given this language proficiency profile of the teacher training students, it is crucial to consider what level of English proficiency should be developed before they begin their careers. The “Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of English” (Government of Japan, 2013) outlines the proficiency expectations for language teachers: secondary school English teachers are expected to achieve Eiken Pre-1 level, which corresponds to CEFR B2 level. According to the CEFR global scale, B2 level language users are “independent users,” enabling them to:

- understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.
- interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.
- produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

(Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24)

Under the current Courses of Study, which stipulates that secondary school English classes should be conducted primarily in English, this standard has been widely adopted throughout the education system in Japan. Similarly, specialized English teachers at the elementary school level are increasingly being hired and are expected to meet the same standards. This raises the question of general elementary teachers who teach English alongside other subjects: What specific proficiency requirements apply to them?

The “Second Basic Plan” does not specify proficiency expectations for them, but the Core Curriculum, commissioned by MEXT and developed by Tokyo Gakugei University in 2017, comprehensively articulates the language proficiency requirements for elementary school teachers, setting CEFR B1 as the appropriate proficiency level. This represents “the ability to conduct foreign language activities and foreign language classes in elementary schools” (Tokyo Gakugei University, 2017). The B1 level designates users as “independent users” who can:

- understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.
- deal with most situations likely to arise whilst in an area where the language is spoken.

- produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.
- describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

(Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24)

The Core Curriculum also expects the following abilities in future elementary school teachers:

- situational adaptability in English-mediated interactions
- ability to generate coherent discourse on familiar topics
- ability to describe experiences and articulate perspectives
- linguistic flexibility to modulate communication according to young learners' comprehension levels

(Tokyo Gakugei University, 2017)

This framework prioritizes speaking skills as a distinctive pedagogical competence and recognizes the communicative challenges inherent in elementary language teaching. This warrants the need to enhance pre-service teachers' communicative competencies through their foreign language programs.

3. Theoretical Framework Supporting Collaborative Teaching

The representative class under study, where peer relationships are established and anxiety is reduced in a homeroom-based class configuration, initially appeared conducive to developing English language proficiency. Students showed active engagement in speaking activities. However, a closer examination of their performance revealed several challenges: when students encounter lexical gaps or grammatical uncertainties, they frequently resort to code-switching to Japanese rather than employing communicative strategies to sustain English interaction. The focus on oral/aural skills within the current pedagogical framework presents inherent constraints—developing strategic competence, grammatical accuracy, and oral fluency simultaneously proves challenging in a single course. These limitations of a single course suggest that the integration of multiple language courses focusing on different skills or aspects could expand the pedagogical scope. Therefore, the relevant prior research has been examined.

3.1 Integrated Skills Instruction

The integration of language skills in English language education has received significant attention in both research and practice. According to Richards and Schmidt (2011), integrated skills instruction is defined as “the teaching of language skills of reading,

writing, listening and speaking in conjunction with each other” (p. 262). This pedagogical approach is supported by numerous studies in the field of second language acquisition. Brown (2007) argues that the integration of skills reflects the natural use of language, as communication typically involves multiple skills simultaneously. Similarly, Oxford (2001) contends that integrated skill approaches promote meaningful interaction in the target language and expose learners to authentic language contexts, which is particularly important in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning environments such as Japan.

In Japan, where the current Courses of Study at the junior and senior high school levels emphasize this balanced approach, Hirose, Ikeda, and Sakane (2016) reported that this instructional method improved students’ speaking skills while increasing their motivation. Onoda (2013) observed an increase in students’ fluency, while Niizato (2008) noted improvements in both speaking speed and the depth of language retention.

The effectiveness of integrated skills instruction has been documented at various educational levels. Sakai, Sato, Kinoshita, and Kikuhara (2019) demonstrated its positive impact on interaction and speaking skills among junior high school students. Oka, Akaike, and Sakai (2004) highlighted its contribution to the overall development of English proficiency. At the university level, Kasamaki (2024) reported correlations between this pedagogical approach and improved performance on standardized English proficiency tests, suggesting broader benefits beyond classroom learning.

Based on these findings, skill-integrated instruction is believed to have a significant impact on the pedagogical approach.

3.2 The Round System Approach

The Round System is another instructional method that is likely to be effective in English courses at institutions of higher education. Suzuki (2007) defines this system as “an instructional method that facilitates student learning of a single material from various angles using diverse approaches.” This pedagogical framework has demonstrated success through numerous implementations, initially at the high school level in Japan.

It has also been applied across different educational stages. Kurokawa (2019, 2020) reporting its effectiveness in bridging elementary and secondary English language education and in providing continuity across educational transitions. Fujita (2013, 2020) documented its success at the high school level, showing measurable gains in language proficiency. Additionally, Kasamaki (2022) examined its application at the college level and demonstrated significant improvements in learner fluency and confidence.

Along with skills-integrated instruction, the Round System appears to be a promising approach and should therefore be considered for inclusion in the instructional intervention.

3.3 Collaborative Teaching Models

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, two first-year English programs—“Comprehensive English” and “Oral English”—are integrated in one of four language classes. Typically, these courses are taught independently by individual instructors with their own instructional goals and materials. However, if language teachers collaborate on shared objectives and content, could instructional time be better utilized, and could students learn more effectively—achieving deeper comprehension and stronger retention—than if the courses were taught separately?

Grounded in this premise, this experimental integration aims to enhance overall English proficiency, with a particular focus on speaking skills, addressing what the Core Curriculum (Tokyo Gakugei University, 2017) identifies as the need for real-world communication. By combining the structural emphasis of “Comprehensive English” with the communicative orientation of “Oral English,” we seek to create a more holistic learning environment—one that supports both linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency, two complementary aspects of language proficiency that prospective teachers will need to demonstrate in their professional practice.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The overall aim of this research is to contribute to the development of the English language proficiency required of future teachers. To achieve this goal, the study specifically aims to diagnose the current communicative competence of students in a representative class through standardized assessment with speaking tests, evaluate the outcomes of an experimental integration of “Comprehensive English” and “Oral English” courses, and identify ways to use these insights to build a coherent curriculum for the next academic year. The following research questions are generated:

- What are the current levels of English proficiency among the students, with particular attention to their speaking skills?
- What outcomes does the experimental integration of language courses produce, compared to the conventional instructional approach?
- How can the insights from the experimental integration be utilized to design a coherent, integrated curriculum?

4.2 Assessment Framework and Instruments

The process began prior to 2024 academic year with the selection of an appropriate assessment tool for the participants. This was necessitated by administrative constraints:

the budget previously allocated for administering the TOEFL Junior exam had been discontinued, and no official English proficiency assessments would be conducted after AY 2023. This shift necessitated the adoption of an alternative, accessible, and pedagogically valid instrument for evaluating students' English proficiency. To achieve this, an assessment framework was developed to highlight key differences among available instruments, based on data provided by MEXT in 2020 (see Table 2). These differences include score ranges, equivalent CEFR levels, and other information such as test formats, number of skills evaluated, and examination costs. Factors not captured in the quantitative data include the geographic availability of testing centers and how often tests are administered.

Table 2: List of Standardized Assessments Evaluating Oral Proficiency

	Eiken	Cambridge	GTEC CBT	IELTS	TEAP	TOEIC LR/SW	TOEFL iBT	Versant S/L
test format	on-site/CBT	on-site	on-site	on-site/on-line	on-site	on-site / IP	on-line	on-line
# of skills	4	4	4	4	2 / 4	2 / 4	4	2
C2	-	CPE 200+	-	8.5-9.0	-	-	-	85-90
C1	1 st 2810-3400	CAE 180-199	1400	7.0-8.0	400	1305-1390 LR 945- SW 360-	95-120	76-84
B2	Pre 1 st 2596-3200	FCE 160-179	1250-1399	5.5-6.5	334-399	1095-1300 LR 785- SW 310-	72-94	67-75 59-66
B1	2 nd 1780-2250	PET 140-159	1000-1249	4.0-5.0	226-333	790-1090 LR 550- SW 240-	42-71	51-58 43-50
A2	Pre 2 nd 1635-2100	KET 12-139	700-999	3.0	186-225	385-785 LR 225- SW 160-	-	36-42 30-35
A1	3 rd - 5 th 790-1875	-	-699	2.0	-	200-380 LR 120- SW 80-	-	22-29
cost	3 rd 6,400 ~ 1 st 10,800	KET 9,900 ~ CPE 25,850	9,900	25,380	6,000 ~ 15,000	LR 7,810 (IP 4,230) SW 10,260	235 USD	3,500 (A) 5,000 (B)

Keys: IP = Institutional Program LR = Listening / Reading (A)= Academic
 CBT = Computer Based Testing SW= Speaking / Writing (B)= Business
 iBT = Internet Based Testing SL = Speaking / Listening

To select the most suitable assessment, the selection criteria prioritized both content validity and accessibility. Based on these parameters, the Versant Speaking and Listening Test was identified as the most appropriate tool for evaluating the participants' English proficiency for the following reasons:

- It can be administered online, eliminating the need for students to travel to a test center.
- Its test duration and difficulty level are appropriate for the target group.
- The cost range for the exam is similar to that of previous TOEFL Junior tests.
- It includes a variety of question types, with the final section resembling the speaking component of local prefectural teacher recruitment examinations, both of which require extended discourse on familiar topics.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

By utilizing the Versant Speaking and Listening Test, comprehensive assessments of students' English proficiency were conducted in a representative first-year language class during AY 2024. A pre-test was administered in April 2024 and a post-test in February 2025. Table 3 shows the changes in English proficiency during the academic year. Although students' scores showed improvement over the year, the post-test results revealed notable disparities between the Versant assessment and the previously employed TOEFL Junior test, as presented in Figure 1.

Table 3: Changes in English Proficiency during AY 2024 (Based on Versant S/L)

AY 2024		Pre-test (Apr.)	Post-test (Feb.)
CEFR (Versant Score)	<A1 (<21)	74.3%	48.6%
	A1 (22-29)	22.9%	21.6%
	A2 (30-42)	0.0%	24.3%
	B1 (43-58)	2.8%	5.5%
	B2 (59-75)	0.0%	0.0%

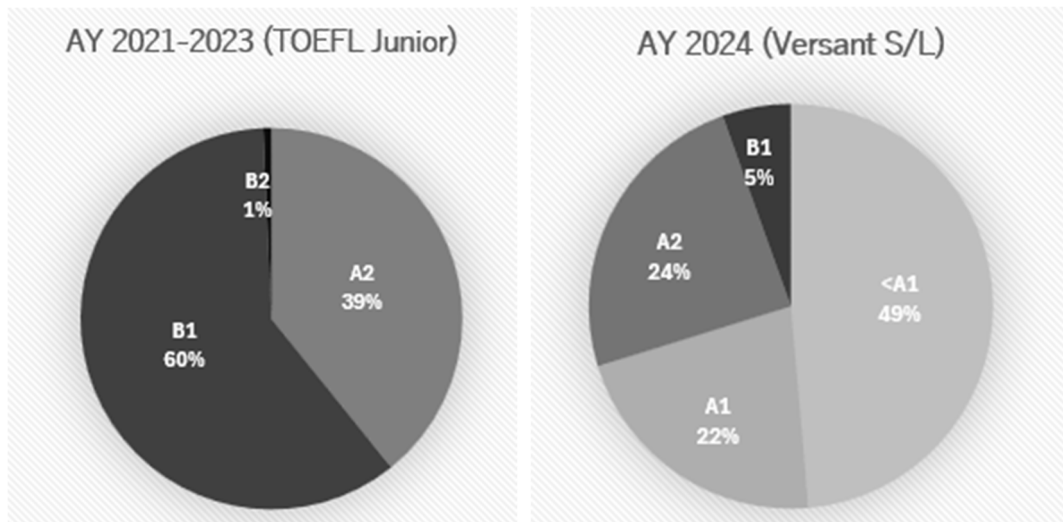


Figure 1: Comparison of TOEFL Junior and Versant Test Scores at Year-End Assessment

As illustrated in Figure 1, approximately half of the participants in AY 2024 scored below the CEFR A1 threshold on the Versant Speaking and Listening Test. This result contrasts sharply with previous TOEFL Junior data, which revealed that 60% of participants demonstrated B1 proficiency and 40% demonstrated A2 proficiency. As discussed in the Background and Context section, the TOEFL Junior does not measure speaking proficiency and cannot evaluate proficiency levels below CEFR A2. Since there is no significant difference in the English proficiency of incoming students each year, these results suggest that the TOEFL Junior may have overestimated participants' actual English proficiency.

However, these results do not necessarily indicate an overall deficiency in speaking ability. The Versant Test also reveals ‘Subskill Score’ which is presented in the following Figure.

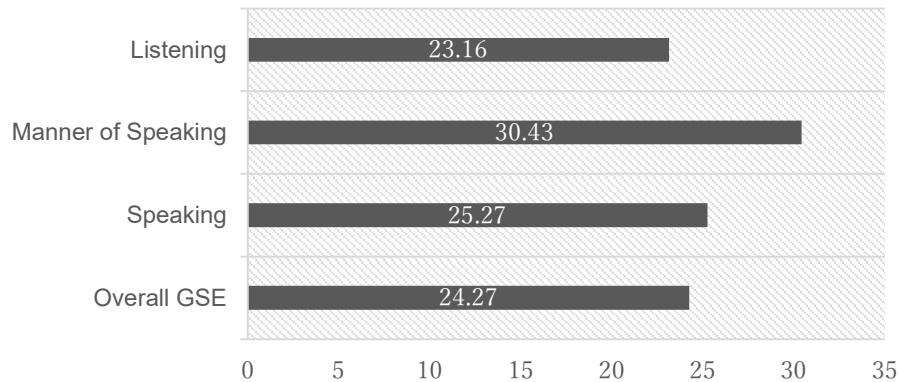


Figure 2: Average Overall and Subskill Score (AY 2024)

A closer examination of the above score reveals moderately higher performance in the ‘Manner of Speaking’ category. According to the Versant Validation Report (Pearson Education, 2024), “‘Manner of Speaking’ reflects a candidate’s pronunciation, fluency, and intelligibility in their speech, including rhythm and phrasing, accuracy of consonants, vowels, and stress, and understandability of speech. It contributes 50% to the Speaking score” (p.14). In contrast, the ‘Speaking’ subcategory reflects “the ability to produce English phrases and clauses in complete sentences. The score is based on the ability to produce consonants, vowels, and stress clearly and understandably, use accurate syntactic processing and appropriate usage of words in meaningful sentence structures, as well as use appropriate rhythm, phrasing, and timing” (p.14). By analyzing these score definitions in conjunction with student performance patterns, we can reasonably infer that the primary area of weakness lies in syntactic processing and sentence construction. This suggests that while students possess relatively adequate pronunciation and fluency, their grammatical accuracy and sentence formation remain underdeveloped.

Based on these findings, we conclude that the students under study generally exhibit clear pronunciation and appropriate rhythm, but their speech contains substantial grammatical errors and occasional lexical inaccuracies, both of which contribute to lower overall speaking scores. This warrants a revision of our foreign language courses.

4.4 Intervention Design

In order to develop our intervention initiatives, we began with a systematic review of the “Comprehensive English” and “Oral English” courses, which included the exchange of teaching materials and classroom observations. These records provided valuable qualitative data that informed subsequent instructional adjustments and helped

conceptualize our collaborative teaching model.

In October 2024, we implemented an experimental collaborative intervention through the Bibliobattle event, in which students recommended and presented literary works of their individual choice and designated a “champion book.” While this annual event has typically been well received by students, it had not previously resulted in satisfactory learning outcomes or meaningful applications of knowledge that demonstrated sustained intellectual engagement.

To enhance its educational impact, a two-stage participatory framework was introduced. In the first round, students gave basic presentations as part of the “Oral English” course, establishing a preliminary baseline of their communicative proficiency. Subsequently, in the “Comprehensive English” course, participants engaged in a critical review and refinement process, analyzing the content, language use, and presentation strategies, with specific attention to purpose, context, and audience expectations. The second round of presentations provided an additional opportunity for students to consolidate and deepen their learning.

Following the event, students were asked to reflect on their learning experiences. Their comments were collected and were coded for analysis.

4.5 Experimental Course Integration Outcomes

Analysis of student feedback revealed a positive response to the experimental integration of the “Comprehensive English” and “Oral English” courses. Students particularly appreciated the increased preparation time, which facilitated the development of more coherent and grammatically accurate presentations. Many respondents pointed out that they were able to improve their communication skills by gaining new insights from their classmates through collaborative work.

Furthermore, the Bibliobattle activity provided students with a sense of accomplishment when they successfully conveyed their ideas in English. Although this evidence derives from a single experimental implementation, the integration appears to have fostered a more comprehensive learning environment that addressed both structural language proficiency and practical communication skills. These outcomes suggest that the approach effectively met its pedagogical goal of enhancing students’ language proficiency through coordinated instruction.

In conclusion, this strategic integration represents a meaningful advancement in our instructional practices. By implementing a structured framework for integrated skills instruction and establishing clear connections between complementary courses, we have created a more holistic and interconnected learning system that supports both accuracy and fluency. Student feedback further indicated the effectiveness of this approach, highlighting increased engagement and measurable improvements in communication skills.

5. Curriculum Development

The pilot implementation in 2024 autumn term showed promising results, with students demonstrating increased engagement and reporting a stronger sense of accomplishment in their use of English. This positive experience served as a catalyst for enhanced motivation to learn the language. Encouraged by these outcomes, a new curriculum was developed to provide a more comprehensive educational framework.

The curriculum redesign process involved several strategic adjustments, including the establishment of common learning objectives, the standardization of instructional pacing, and the implementation of consistent thematic content across courses. The selected topics were designed to reflect the needs and interests of first-year students while addressing common linguistic challenges faced by Japanese learners.

The collaborative teaching model follows a structured progression that allows students to engage with topics through different language skills and subsequently deepen their understanding by revisiting related content across courses. This spiral approach to learning reinforces key concepts while gradually introducing linguistic complexity. Figure 3 illustrates this integrative model.

Objectives: To maximize students' communicative competence through the integration of two complementary courses

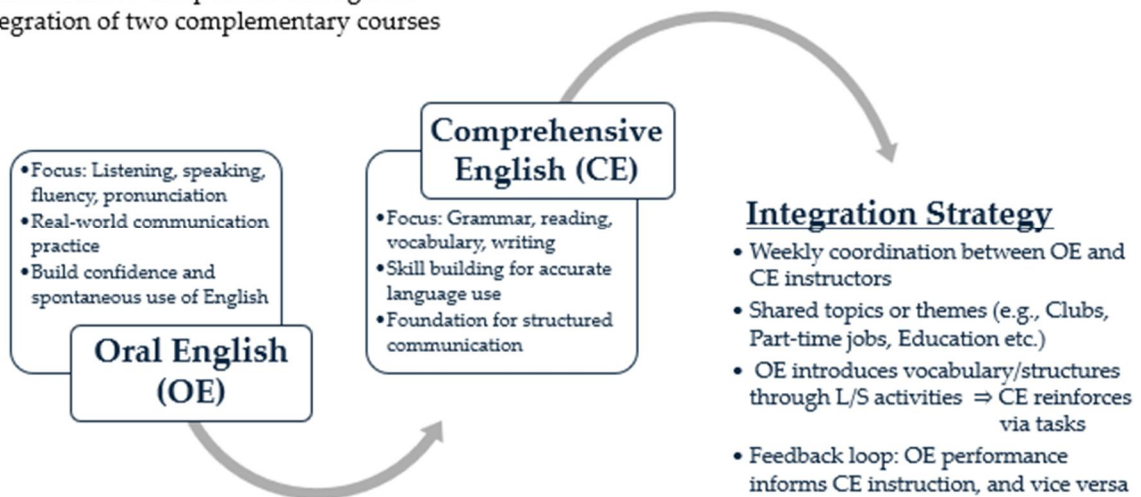


Figure 3: Integrated Model of “Oral English” and “Comprehensive English”

Full implementation of the integrated curriculum is scheduled for the 2025 academic year, with systematic evaluation protocols to assess its effectiveness in developing the specific English language skills required for elementary school teaching. This initiative recognizes that prospective elementary school teachers serve as language learning models for their students. Therefore, fostering positive attitudes toward language learning, in

addition to developing language skills, is another important objective. By cultivating enthusiasm and confidence among pre-service teachers, the curriculum aims to generate a positive cascade effect across future generations of language learners.

The redesigned curriculum represents a systematic approach to English language instruction, addressing both immediate proficiency needs and longer-term attitudinal outcomes. Building on the successful pilot implementation and incorporating proven methodologies, this integrated framework offers a promising path toward enhancing the English language education of prospective elementary school teachers in Japan.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

This study identified and addressed a critical disparity between the expected proficiency level for practicing teachers and the current proficiency levels of the prospective teachers under study. Our diagnostic assessment using the Versant Speaking and Listening Test revealed that approximately half of the students scored below the CEFR A1 threshold, well below the B1 level required by the Core Curriculum for effective English teaching at the elementary school level. This gap was particularly evident in grammatical accuracy and sentence structure, despite relatively adequate pronunciation and fluency.

To address this challenge, the two first-year language courses—"Comprehensive English" and "Oral English"—were experimentally integrated. The former was designed to improve grammatical accuracy, while the latter was intended to enhance oral proficiency. The initiative produced promising results. The collaborative teaching model, implemented through a Bibliobattle event, provided students with multiple opportunities to develop and refine their language skills in varied contexts. Student feedback indicated increased engagement, enhanced confidence, and a stronger sense of accomplishment in communicative tasks. These outcomes suggest that the integrated approach effectively supports the development of practical communication skills.

Based on these findings, the curriculum for the 2025 academic year has been redesigned to include common learning objectives, standardized instructional pacing, and consistent thematic content across courses. Employing the round system approach, the new curriculum aims to reinforce key language concepts while increasing the complexity of language use. This shift represents an advancement in our pedagogical framework, fostering a more holistic and cohesive learning environment that promotes both language proficiency and positive attitudes toward language learning.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The integrated approach was implemented in only one representative class, which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the intervention was relatively short, and its long-term effects remain to be evaluated. Future research should explore several promising directions. Longitudinal studies tracking students' language development throughout their university

education would offer valuable insights into the sustained impact of the integrated approach. Furthermore, examining the relationship between pre-service teachers' language proficiency and their subsequent teaching effectiveness would deepen understanding of how language ability translates into pedagogical practice.

The implications of this study extend beyond our immediate institutional context. As Japan continues to emphasize English language instruction in elementary education, ensuring that prospective teachers attain the necessary language proficiency is becoming increasingly important. Our integrated approach offers a potential model for other teacher training institutions facing similar challenges. By addressing both linguistic competence and communicative confidence, this approach aims to prepare educators who can effectively support English language learning among their students.

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教員に求められる英語力の獲得を目指して

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【要 旨】 本研究は、小学校教員に求められる英語運用能力の獲得を目指し、教員養成課程の外国語科目で実施した取り組みとその効果を検討するものである。調査の結果、小学校外国語の指導に期待される英語力と、調査対象学生の話すことを含めた英語力との間に顕著な差異が認められた。英語力の改善に向け、外国語科目間において、技能を統合した授業連携を実施したところ、調査学生の達成感および英語使用に対する自信の向上が認められ、このアプローチの有効性が示唆された。これらの結果を踏まえ、今後はシラバスの再構築や連携プログラムの拡充を進める予定である。

本研究の調査対象は、初年次外国語教育の1クラスに限定されており、結果の一般化には広範かつ継続的な検証が必要である。しかし、小学校における英語指導の充実が求められる現状において、教員志望学生の言語運用能力向上を図る一事例として一定の意味を有すると考えられる。

【キーワード】 教員の英語運用能力 小学校外国語 教員養成 コア・カリキュラム 技能統合 授業連携