

Challenges to Innovation in Japanese Tertiary Educational Institutions: The Case of Advanced CEP

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Niigata University of International and Information Studies Journal of Research (9), pp. 29-41 (2006)

Abstract

In light of the ongoing developments with the Advanced Levels of the Communicative English Program (CEP), this paper considers some of the background literature that discusses change and innovation in educational institutions. It is argued that change agents should learn as much as possible about the organizational culture of the school. The potential level of political vulnerability that might be experienced by innovators, and the real world needs of the stakeholders should also be identified before implementing reforms. The description of educational environment, stakeholders and strategies taken have been provided in the development of Advanced CEP will hopefully to serve as a reference for potential change agents as they consider ways and means to created improved learning environments at their schools and institutions.

Introduction

This paper presents the early stages of curriculum innovation in the Advanced Communicative English Program (Advanced CEP) at Niigata University of International and Information Studies. Following a review of the literature discussing innovation and curriculum development, the setting, stakeholders and strategies of this case study will be described. Based upon important principles from research in curriculum development, this paper will reflect upon why the attempts to innovate at this school are seen as on the path towards success.

Review of the Literature

In this section, considerations about some of the conditions that are believed to be important for the success of innovations will be considered. Because of the vast amount of literature dealing with the subject of curriculum development in TESOL, this discussion shall be limited by necessity to definitions and theoretical models which, it is believed, have a direct bearing on the later discussions of this case study.

Definitions and Models

The distinction of *innovation*, and how this differs from the notion of *change* is also a frequent topic of discussion in the literature (Markee 2001; Kennedy 1999; White, 1995). Damanpour and Evan (1984), identify two basic forms of innovation: Product Innovations (new things or materials) and Process Innovations (new ways of doing things or paradigm shifts in the manner in which a situation is perceived). Osbourne (1998), who studied voluntary non-profit organizations and innovations in public services, identifies further categories, stating that those who innovate in these environments use a combination of product and process approaches. His typology of innovations includes developmental innovations, in which the present system is modified for the current end users, expansionary innovations, where new services are offered to new end users, evolutionary innovations, those being when new services are created for existing end users, and finally, total innovations, which are completely new innovations for a new group of users. *Innovation* in this paper is defined as ideas or practices that are perceived by the end users as new. Innovations are a result of a conscious use of specialist knowledge that has been intentionally designed to improve a specific educational setting. This term will be used interchangeably with the idea of language curriculum reforms, regardless of whether they are top-down or bottom-up in nature (Slater, 1985). Innovation will differ in this paper from notion of *change* which, though sometimes the result of innovation, can be regressive or the result of unintentional actions that have taken place over time (Hadley, 1999).

Theoretical Framework for Understanding Innovations

A number of seminal works stemming from the social sciences are widely recognized as laying the foundation upon which many in TESOL base their initiative for innovation (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; White, Martin, Stimson, & Hodge, 1991). Markee (2001), White (1995) and Hord (1992) are

among those who suggest that this body of research is best understood as interconnected; seen in this light, these studies are believed to be helpful in providing insights into the complex dynamics of curriculum development.

Based upon Rogers' influential Theory of Diffusion, which is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system (Rogers, 1962/1995:5), R.G. Havelock (1971) offers several models of innovation, which are known today as the Research, Development and Diffusion Model, the Problem-Solving Model and the Social Interaction Model. The names of each are self-explanatory, except that it should be noted that Havelock understood the Research, Development and Diffusion Model and the Problem-Solving Model as belonging to group projects, and the Social Interaction Model as the work of an individual who is engaged in the task of building group support for innovations.

Charles Handy describes organizations in terms of having specific cultures, an idea which can be applied to educational institutions. Handy called these Power, Role, Task, and Person cultures (Handy, 1976/1999:183-191). A power culture has one charismatic and/or authoritarian leader who controls virtually every aspect of the organization. A role-based organizational culture tends to be highly bureaucratized, with individuals conforming either to an explicit or implicit set of job descriptions. Task cultures feature groups of experts who band together to solve a problem or complete a project, while person-centered organizations are predisposed to learn towards low levels of accountability to a central authority so that individuals can use their unique talents and expertise to complete a certain task or project.

Chin and Benne (1976) have illustrated unique approaches that are commonly used by both individuals and organizations during the process of innovation. These are identified as Power-Coercive, Empirical-Rational, and Normative-Re-educative. Power-Coercive strategies, as the name implies, depends on political, economic, moral or legal power to realize one's objectives. Its success usually relies on the use of authoritative rather than coercive power (Chin & Benne, 1976:34). Examples of this approach are when a power elite uses existing institutions, laws and financial resources to enforce compliance from those with less power. An Empirical-Rational approach is founded on the belief that most people are sensible, and will adopt an innovation once they understand it is in their best interest. Examples of this strategy in action can be seen in the dissemination of research, careful selection of personnel to make sure the right people are in the right post, employing experts to innovate in the form of education, and using semantics to redefine commonly understood terminology (Chin & Benne 1976:39). Normative-Re-educative approaches do not deny that people can be rational, but they highlight the point that sociocultural norms are strong inhibitors to changes in attitudes or established practices. People modify their beliefs and behavior only after developing a commitment to new norms. This requires "changes in values, skills and significant relationships, not just changes in knowledge, information or intellectual rationales for action and practice" (Chin & Benne, 1976:34). Normative-Re-educative strategies employ a softer "experience-based" process. Labeling innovators as "change agents," this approach views others within the organization as "clients." Change agents, like doctors or therapists,

educate clients about possible problems in the organization, and work collaboratively with their clients to find solutions.

Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991) has also had far-reaching implications for language curriculum development (Edwards, 2003; Gorsuch, 2001; Kennedy, Doyle, & Goh, 1999; Long, 1997). The problem, according to Ajzen, is that regardless of what strategy for innovation is used, predicting how people will respond to the innovations can be fraught with peril. A central tenet of his Theory of Planned Behavior proposes that a key to better understanding how people will organizationally respond to innovations is through a discovery of the true intentions of key stakeholders. Ajzen theorizes that a relatively small number of beliefs, called salient beliefs (1991:191), will influence individual behavior at any given moment.

Salient beliefs are divided into three types: Behavioral Attitudes, Subjective Norms and Perceived Behavioral Controls (Figure 1). Behavioral Attitudes are beliefs about the possible

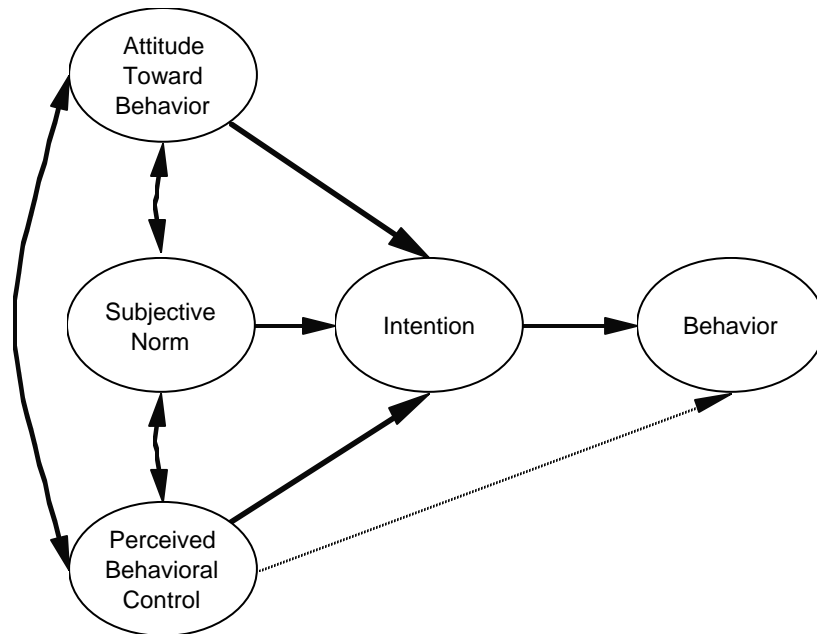


Figure 1 Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

positive (or negative) outcomes of the behavior (in this case, an educational innovation). Subjective Norms relate to the individual's predictions of how other stakeholders in the organization might react to the innovation. The individual's perception of the relative ease or difficulty of using the innovation, and whether he or she has the confidence to make use of it, are known as Perceived Behavioral Controls. Ajzen (2001) maintains that a heightened awareness of the factors affecting the intentions of the organization's stakeholders will equip change agents with a better understanding about how to potentially succeed in their efforts to innovate. Other conditions which are believed to be common to successful curricula will now be considered.

Conditions Necessary for the Success of Curricular Innovations

Curriculum development, according to Nunan and Lamb (2001:36) is “a delicate juggling act” for change agents as they consider the various issues and stakeholders within their educational environments. The literature is replete with impressive lists that describe the attributes needed for innovations to thrive. Based upon his research of over 1,500 studies on innovations in various educational fields, Rogers (1962/1995) concludes that innovations succeed when they are:

- Advantageous to the end users
- Compatible with earlier educational practices in the institution
- Simple to understand and utilize
- Easy to try out and easy to back away from
- Visible to all the stakeholders

In addition to our earlier discussion of stakeholders’ salient beliefs, Kennedy et al (1999:53-54) identify further issues to consider:

- There must be a collaborative environment that is conducive for innovations to occur
- Support from management is crucial for successful implementation
- Teachers need to be trained in the innovation
- Change agents must maximize benefits and minimize costs to stakeholders
- Change agents must be skilled in the subject content, and need expertise in management and interpersonal relations
- Change agents must remember that innovation is as much a political as a rational activity

These and related studies can be summarized by identifying three important factors that should be considered when planning innovations: the change agent, the educational environment, and the real needs of stakeholders.

Change Agents

It is often the case that much of the responsibility for the success or failure of innovations is placed on the change agents. This is unfortunate, since in many projects, change agents are inexperienced foreign language teachers who lack knowledge about the wider dynamics within the institutions they are serving. Many work as change agents in a secondary role to their responsibilities as teachers (Carliss, 2001; Kennedy, 1999). Doyle (1999) points out that the potential success of change agents is limited by their degree of political vulnerability within a school (Figure 2). If a change agent has autonomy over project goals, clearly-stated responsibilities, management support, and if only a few stakeholders must be relied upon in the organization, the change agent has a strong political base upon which to build support for innovation, but the converse of these conditions is equally true (Doyle, 1999:64).

David Kennedy (1999) cautions change agents who are working abroad that they must prepare for a period of dissonance between their own educational beliefs and the beliefs of those within the institution. Holliday (2001:175) advises these change agents to avoid the “potentially damaging culturalist process of mutual otherization,” in which one group represents expatriate native English speakers that possess skills and know-how, and the other is portrayed as non-native speakers in need of training, despite (or because of) their culturally alien and inherently inferior worldview. If change agents come across as ideologically-driven or superior in their demeanor, it is likely that they will face stiff resistance from resentful representatives of the various organizational subcultures from within the institution (Kennedy, 1999:31).



Figure 2 Contextual factors determining the vulnerability of a change agent (adapted from Doyle, 1999)

Many current curriculum innovations today require some skill in the use of computers, software or utilization of knowledge in a specialist field (Tatnall & Davey, 2004), and change agents must consider the extent to which their proposed innovations can be utilized by teachers and students, as well as whether or not it poses a threat to their existing pedagogical beliefs (Holiday, 2001; Markee, 2001). Innovators need to strike a balance between what Chin and Benne (1976:33) call “thing technologies” and “people technologies”, that is, the knowledge of how people behave when faced with new, untested teaching practices. Pinar (1999:74) argues that in addition to providing training for implementing innovations, it is vital for change agents to have people skills so they can “develop a good rapport with teachers through both group and personal meetings.” Change agents lacking these skills should expect to encounter greater difficulty in garnering support for their innovations.

Environmental Issues

The stakeholders that the change agent will most frequently encounter during the day in the educational environment will likely be the teachers and learners. Li (2001:163) explains that “how teachers as end users of an innovation perceive its feasibility is a crucial factor in the ultimate success or failure of that innovation.” Ironically, however, teachers are the stakeholders most often described in the literature as being resistant to innovation:

...teachers’ attitudes are a product of values and attitudes within a particular culture, and thus, of all the factors in curriculum innovation, they are the least susceptible to change (Young & Lee, 1987:84, in Carliss, 1999).

Described as “poor implementers of other people’s ideas,” (MacDonald 1991:3, in Carliss, 1999), Bolam (1976, in Pinar, 1999) argues that if a majority of teachers in an organization are traditionally-minded, given the chance, they will subvert any efforts at innovation. Sarason (1971) claims this is often due to feelings of isolation in their classes on one hand, and on the other, suppressed hostility towards impassive educational bureaucracies, which leads ultimately to thoughts of inadequacy and avoidance of participatory projects. Rogers (1962/1995) would call such teachers *resisters*. Organizations with a large number of resisters are not expected to be truly innovative.

However, it is obvious that this description does not fit for most language educators, and it is crucial for change agents to reach nonresistant teachers early on so they can share ownership of the educational innovations (Pinar, 1999). The degree to which teachers can work together in a spirit of collegiality will have a direct bearing upon the success of the project (Fennessy, 1994). Holliday (2001:169) adds that this requires change agents to maintain an open mind about different the pedagogic practices and beliefs of their dedicated colleagues. Curriculum designers must periodically remind themselves that teachers from other countries have good reason for forming different beliefs about the nature of curriculum development, and innovators from divergent backgrounds should maintain a dialog in order to build cultural continuity between the practices they wish to introduce and the traditional expectations of the end users.

Holliday adds that during the process of dialog, care must be taken not to neglect the learners, who, as the ultimate end users of the innovations, are frequently “somewhere else” during the process of creative discourse. Listening to students should be at the forefront of innovation (Holliday, 2001:171). “Unfortunately,” write Diaz-Greenberg and Nevin, “most studies do not include the student’s perceptions of the problems, thus creating a gap” (2003:213). Such a gap between student needs and the ongoing professional discourse can cause any innovations to fail.

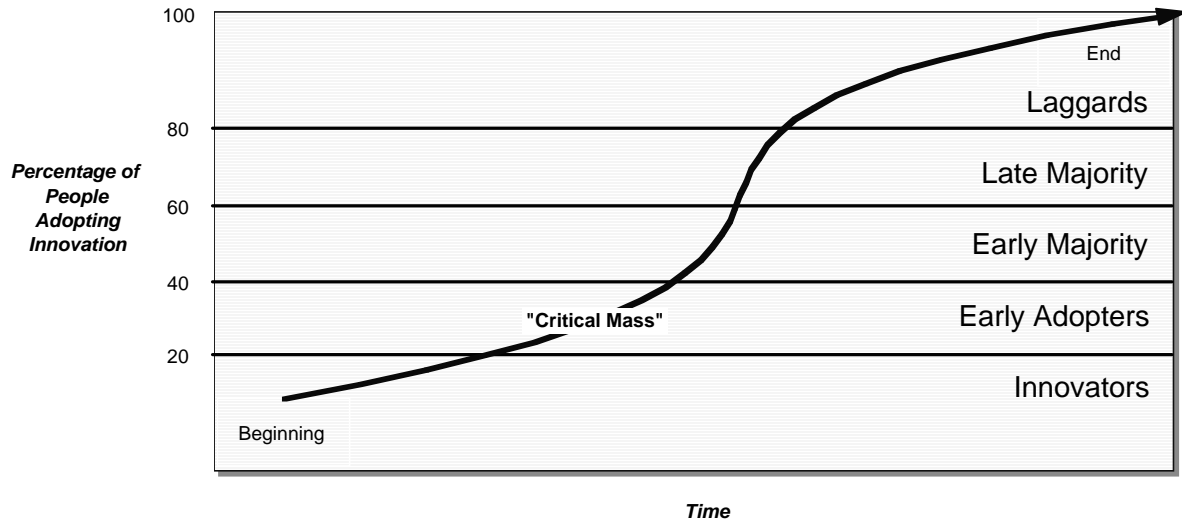


Figure 3 S-curve for the Adoption of Educational Innovations (Adapted from Rogers, 1962/1995 and Markee, 2001).

A final environmental element to consider is the time needed for innovations to diffuse through an organization. Rogers (1962/1995) identifies five types of potential adopters among the stakeholders of an organization: innovators, early adopter, early majority, late majority and laggards (resisters are considered as virtually impervious to new ideas). The process of adoption of an innovation is often represented as an S-shaped diffusion curve (Figure 3). Markee (2001:122) states that when the number of early adopters reaches a critical mass of 25 percent, a new teaching practice may gain the sufficient momentum needed to be adopted. Understanding this dynamic allows change agents to focus their attention on those who have the propensity to adopt new practices, and to identify leaders who can sway others in the organization (Goh, 1999:17). However, the time required for adoption will depend upon the particular character of each organization. Time limits imposed by contractual agreements or other environmental factors may not allow some innovators time to see the project through to fruition.

Discovering the Real Needs

While it may seem obvious that innovations should satisfy the real life needs of stakeholders within an institution, it is sometimes the case that reform efforts are feigned by schools that are under pressure to demonstrate initiative to education boards and ministries (Hargreaves, 1994). Lišić (2004) explains this stems from a school culture learning over time to become resistant. If in the past, the culture of a school has successfully returned to the status quo in the face of proposed innovations, this will become a precedent for increased change resistance. She states that a change resistant organizational culture is the main reason for the failure of innovative initiatives. In the best case scenario, innovations have only a

30% chance for success in such schools (Lišić, 2004:12). The implicit need at resistant organizations is to preserve existing structures and traditional practices. Innovations may be discussed, but are either never truly put into practice, or trialed in such a way that the innovations are destined to fail. The result is to further inoculate the organization from the threat of future disruption, coming in the form of innovation.

It is for reasons such as these that curriculum designers need to discover the actual needs of the major stakeholders (Berwick, 1989). Innovators operate under the assumption that stakeholders, including the language learners, are aware of what they need if asked. Based upon the findings of a needs analysis of the educational organization, a change agent “is one step nearer to being able to translate these needs into linguistic and pedagogic terms in order to produce and teach an effective course” (MacKay, 1978:21). Needs analysis often needs to be more than a simple inventory of questions. In the Japanese context, it requires a long-term commitment on the part of the innovator to observe what stakeholders actually want and value based upon their actions, which make clash with their public statements of need.

Advanced CEP

In light of the above discussion, the following is a report of the ongoing developmental innovations taking place in Advanced CEP at Niigata University of International and Information Studies. The setting, stakeholders, strategies and results of innovations attempted at NNCT will now be examined.

Setting

Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS) is a private four-year college in Niigata City, Japan. Started in 1994, the college is presently composed of two departments, Information Systems and Information Culture, and the total student population is under 2000. It is the second choice of students in the prefecture after Niigata University, which has recently become a semi-privatized national college. The Communicative English Program (CEP) was created in 2000 with the goal of teaching learners International English, as opposed to an overemphasis on American or British English. Advanced CEP was created at the same time, but scheduling problems and a lack of full accreditation for the course severely hampered development on the upper levels until 2004, when the faculty of the Department of Information Culture decided that Advanced CEP would receive better accreditation and support within the curriculum in terms of time resources and recognition.

Stakeholders

The management powerbase of the school is composed of conservative staff members of a retired LDP politician who was, until recently, the regent of the university. As such, upper level administrators are often focused on issues that are divorced from daily educational concerns, and are either unaware of, or not particularly interested in CEP, except in terms of its importance as a tool for the recruitment of new students.

The faculty in the Department of Information Culture, has worked towards the creation of a wider curriculum that focuses on social justice, intercultural understanding, and linguistic learning within the

Japanese society and abroad. While most express interest in CEP symbolically as an important part of their international curriculum, there is considerably less interest in understanding the true nature of the language program. The CEP Instructors are at the forefront of the development process. It is ironic therefore that they are non-tenured teachers who have been employed under the umbrella of the administrative staff rather than as faculty. With contracts that last for only up to four years, their knowledge of the program is extensive, although their vital contribution is often short-lived.

Over 90% of the students at NUIS come from Niigata City or the immediate surrounding metropolitan area. A large number of these students came to NUIS as the second choice after failing to enter Niigata University, which continues to have a higher level of prestige in the prefecture. Most of the learners who participate in the Advanced CEP Course have been abroad in the American Overseas Program, and have expressed an interest to maintain the level of language proficiency that they acquired while studying there. The CEP Coordinator is a tenured member of faculty who seeks to provide continuity with the programme between these various stakeholders.

Project Background

In terms of the overall nature of CEP, the Coordinator was aware that fully-negotiated, democratic classes would, as Shor (1996) discovered, likely be a threat to the conservative educational beliefs of power brokers of the university. Therefore, the terminology and shape of CEP was purposely designed to find common ground between the conservative and liberal dynamics that take place in the non-transparent decision-making apparatus of NUIS, with an eye to the perception discovered by numerous inhouse surveys that improved oral communication is seen as an attractive skill to new students, teachers and administrators alike, albeit for different reasons.

With this in mind, the first year of CEP has been set up as a semi-intensive required course for all students in the department. The coordinator decided that the interests of management needed to be addressed, and as such, the first year of the program is controlled, structured, and undemocratic. With so many learners of differing interests and levels of motivation, this decision is also seen as pragmatic and expedient. In-house research (Hadley, Jeffrey, & Warwick, 2002) suggests that student proficiency in English does improve after one year in the program, and if learners opt for the university's semester overseas program in the United States, they return to NUIS with the linguistic tools they need to proceed to the second year of CEP (Advanced CEP), which is designed to help students engage in the task of language learning for life.

With the traditional concerns of the university's organizational culture thus satisfied, Advanced CEP is being developed as an elective course for students who wish to continue their English language study. Approximately 20 to 30 students enter the course at the beginning of the year, but this number declines to about half by the end of first semester, because of either the challenge of the course, or time conflicts with other courses that meet in the afternoon. The core students that remain tend to be those who have made a significant investment of time in the study of English, and as such, have started on a journey

towards accepting their developing language ability as part of their identity. Contrasting the oftspoken phrase in rural Niigata of “I am Japanese, so I can’t speak English,” instructors encourage students to consider saying instead, “I am Japanese, and I speak English.”

Needs Analysis

The development of a successful language education syllabus and materials should clearly reflect the interests of students and situations which students feel are related to their lives. The needs not only of the students, but also of the CEP Instructors, who often report feelings of isolation from the dynamics of life at the university, need to be considered. The needs of the CEP Instructors are met by the greater freedom given them with respect to how to teach and how to approach topical issues, compared with that in the CEP classes for first year students. Advanced CEP is then designed to encourage full student involvement from the very earliest stages of coursework. The Coordinator works with students and classroom instructors to identify the learners’ perceived language learning needs through interviews and informal discussion, and then balances this information with the needs and resources of teachers facilitating the classes. Such an approach to needs analysis not only flexible, it is also supported in the literature by Nunan (1996), Breen and Littlejohn (2000), and McDevitt (2004), and it complements the concerns of the Japanese government, since language study in this light should help both learners and teachers to foster life-learning and life affirming dispositions for language growth and for personal development (MEXT, 1998; MEXT, 2003). Based upon the needs of students expressed by a variety of stakeholders, the dispositions that we encourage in Advanced CEP are as follows:

1. asking questions and being inquisitive,
2. guessing and being curious,
3. being compassionate and showing empathy,
4. being less judgmental and prejudicial,
5. making decisions,
6. being more independent and self-reliant,
7. being less competitive and more cooperative,
8. tolerating ambiguity and difference,
9. sharing explicit and implicit understandings,
10. being more flexible and adaptable.

Materials Design

Following the lead of Mohan (1991) and Holliday (1994), the Advanced CEP curriculum and classroom materials are based on the topics found in the third and fourth year graduation seminars, taught by full-time faculty in the department. These faculty members are not language teachers and teach a variety of subjects in the seminars, such as peace studies, environmental awareness, gender issues, and regional

dialog with Northeastern Asian countries. Students self-select these seminars with this Japanese member of the faculty, and bring a sense of curiosity as they explore both personal and social issues with their teacher-mentor.

Although the possible topics available to the class are limited mostly to the topics offered in the graduation seminar, the students in the Advanced CEP class decide which topics they wish to discuss. Materials are then created in modular form by the coordinator. The non-language teaching faculty members who teach the seminars and the CEP instructors are provided with these materials beforehand to prepare for the course (Appendix One).

Students are required to do much of their work outside the classroom, and as much as possible, interact with English speakers who are not part of the university or the course in order to help them develop their opinions. Students bring these thoughts and experiences to the Advanced CEP class. Faculty members teaching the seminars who are fluent in English are also regularly invited to class to participate with the students during the times when the topic of their seminar class is being discussed in the Advanced CEP class. Debates in English on these class topics are held once every two weeks. During this time, the values and opinions of all the students and faculty are considered in an open forum, and through this dialogue, a new sense of community built on tolerance and cooperation is created.

Evaluation

Initiatives such as the type seen in Advanced CEP are not without unique challenges. One problem that has frequently emerged in Advanced CEP has been the development of closed communities. Students who have invested their time studying in Advanced CEP become tight-knit groups, and new students who do not fit in socially with this established group drop out of the class. As well, improvements in language in terms of proficiency seem to be much less pronounced than in the subsequent years. One reason is because the learners come to the class with a higher level of proficiency than when they started their first year of CEP, so it is natural to see less dramatic improvement in such pre-intermediate learners. However, it is also the case that the positive affective factors of the group mitigate a necessary element of pressure needed to encourage students to push themselves once they have attained a certain level of communicative competence.

Despite these concerns, it is felt that the positive results observed in Advanced CEP over the past year have outweighed most of these weaknesses. Students have truly taken ownership of the class. Integration of CEP into other parts of the overall curriculum has helped students and Information Culture faculty to connect their studies and disciplines to English Language Learning in an immediate and meaningful way. We have observed that students seem to be living with English outside the classroom as they wrestle with complex issues. Many students also seem to be gradually linking English language learning experiences with their own personal identities, and this suggests that they may well be on the path towards a lifetime of language learning and participation as member of the International Community.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify important factors that, if not properly addressed, could severely limit the effectiveness of innovative initiatives in any school. Learning as much as possible about the organizational culture of the school, discerning the level of political vulnerability of the change agent, and including all stakeholders in the innovation process are vital for success. In the case of Advanced CEP, it appears that a judicious consideration of these issues has opened the way for a very successful beginning. By its continued acceptance from a majority of stakeholders, Advanced CEP seems to have reached the critical mass needed to survive long-term implementation. While innovative, the course does not seek to challenge any of the earlier educational practices or beliefs at NUIS, and instead has attempted to adapt to the perceived needs of the major stakeholders. The development of Advanced CEP into the existing framework of the Department of Information Culture's seminar structure has made it simpler for non-language teachers to understand the aim of the course, and to utilize their existing expertise in helping the course to succeed. Since the majority of the work is done by the CEP Instructors in preparing the students, it is easy for students and other teachers to try out the innovations, and it is easy to back away from participation in its development without a loss of face. Advanced CEP as a recruitment tool for management stakeholders has made it visible to all other stakeholders, both inside and outside of NUIS.

Because support, or at least noninterference from upper level management has been secured, space has been created for faculty to collaborate in the development of Advanced CEP. Time has been allowed for training instructors in the innovation. It appears that most stakeholders have weighed their own potential costs and benefits of "investing" in Advanced CEP, found it to be a useful project, and have decided to give it their cautious support. Areas in which the innovation could further develop would center on the Coordinator gaining more expertise in management and interpersonal skills, with the understanding that curriculum innovation is as much a political as it is an educational activity. In this light, it is hoped that this paper can serve as a resource to other potential change agents as they consider new possibilities at their educational institutions.

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