

# A Report: Some Thoughts on Observing ESL Classes at Boston University

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## I. Introduction

I was given the opportunity to study at Department of English, Boston University (BU) for one year from April 1997 to March 1998. At that time I had opportunities to observe some of ESL classes there. This report is to give some idea of BU ESL education, consider how it is different from ours in Japan and find out what we could learn from it.

Boston University, founded in 1867, is the third-largest independent university in the United States and has 15 Schools and Colleges. It has more than 29,000 students, about 15.5% (more than 4,500) of whom are international students (Boston University, 1997: 5,12). This means that BU has quite a large number of international students (indeed some say the largest in the US) to give ESL education.

Two parts of BU, CELOP (The Center for English Language and Orientation Programs at Boston University) and Department of English are responsible for ESL education of international students. CELOP takes care of those who are preparing for study at BU or other American universities. An applicant for BU whose native language is not English must take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Most BU academic departments require a 550 or 600 TOEFL score. CELOP helps students improve their English proficiency until they can get the score required. Department of English, on the other hand, takes care of those who has enrolled in BU. They provide them composition courses.

## II. ESL Education at CELOP (The Center for English Language and Orientation Programs at Boston University)

### 1. Eligibility and Its Students

All applicants for CELOP must be at least 17 years of age. A high school diploma or equivalent is required for admission. There are about 600 international students at CELOP each semester from various countries in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and sometimes from Europe. Japanese students comprise about 20% of the total number of the students at the moment (so you could find two or three Japanese in a class of 15 students), though there used to be more of them when Japanese economy was prosperous.

### 2. Levels

There are 8 levels of classes to which students are assigned by a placement test at the beginning

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of each term. Levels A and B are for beginners: Level A is for students with very limited English ability, B is for people with a 300-350 TOEFL score. Low C, Mid C, and High C are for intermediate students: the TOEFL score of the students in High C would be about 450. Low D (TOEFL score: about 500), High D, and E (TOEFL score: about 580-600) are for advanced students.

### 3. Terms and Courses

CELOP has three terms: Fall Term, Spring Term and Summer Term. It offers a 12-week intensive English course in each term: EOP EN 050 (24 class hours per week) in Fall and Spring Terms, and EN 050 (20 class hours per week) in Summer Term. All levels have Core English Class: Integrated Class in listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. In Fall and Spring Terms students have 15 class hours of Core out of 24 per week, and in Summer Term 12 class hours of Core out of 20 per week. Sometimes just one teacher teaches the same students all these 15 or 12 class hours of Core, but generally two or three teachers closely work together and divide the various skills mentioned above. Beginners (Level A and B students) have Survival/Speaking Class for the rest of class hours: 9 in fall and spring, and 8 in summer. In place of Survival/Speaking, intermediate and advanced students have two Elective Classes, 4.5 class hours each in fall and spring, 4 each in summer. These students have 4 to 6 selections of Electives assigned to their each level, which they can choose from. There are two kinds of Electives: content-based such as American Culture, Business Topics, Video Projects, TV News, Conversation, Theatre, and skill-based such as TOEFL Test Preparation, Study Skills, Pronunciation, Vocabulary Development. These Electives are designed to develop each student's special interests and needs, and this combination of Core and Elective seems to be working well.

CELOP has its own book list and teachers usually choose their course books from a variety of books assigned to each level on that list. In addition to traditional language laboratories, CELOP has two computer labs, where many Core Classes and some Elective Classes often meet. These labs are also open to students' self-study for some hours. CELOP's attendance policy is rather strict: if a student misses more than 10% of all required classes in the program, he/she will not receive a certificate. Probation reports are issued every two weeks and students with poor attendance get warned. There are some academic advisors at CELOP who can counsel students regarding US college and university admissions, and after studying here for one to five semesters depending on what level they initially were and how much their English has improved, most students enroll in BU or some other colleges or universities in the US.

### 4. On Observing Some Classes at CELOP

I observed several Core Classes of different levels and one Elective Class. On observing these classes what impressed me most was smallness of the classes. The number of students in one class is 13-15. To one who is used to English classes in Japan (the number of students ranging from 40-60), this would seem a dream class. In this class size of 13-15 the physical and psychological distance between the teacher and the students is very close. The teacher can very easily know whether the students are interested or not, whether they understand what the teacher is saying, and

the strengths and weaknesses in each student's English ability. Also, the distance between the students is small. They readily participate in pair works or group works assigned by the teacher: they correct each other, exchange questions and answers, and participate in group discussions. It is easy for the teacher to make the round, join the groups, correct students and make comments. As a result, I found the classes very lively and every student seemed to enjoy learning English.

Secondly, the merit of speaking English only in class seemed obvious. Since none of the teachers at CELOP speaks the mother tongue of a student, he/she has to speak English to communicate with the teacher. The student has to use it to communicate with other students from other countries. And this serves as a very good practice in constantly listening, thinking in English and speaking it.

### III. ESL Education by Department of English

#### 1. Composition Requirement

BU puts a special emphasis on English composition. Its Bulletin says, "The ability to read intelligently and sensitively and to write clearly, logically, and imaginatively is basic to all study, as well as to continued growth as an educated person and contributing citizen" (46). BU has six composition courses offered by Department of English. The courses and their descriptions are as follows.

CAS EN 101 Expository Composition for International Students 1: For students whose native language is not English. *Concentrates on the basics of English Composition: writing paragraphs and short essays*. Includes some work on vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Frequent papers and exercises. Discussion of readings.

CAS EN 102 Expository Composition for International Students II: For students whose native language is not English. *Extensive practice in writing using the basic principles of rhetoric*. Frequent papers including *a short research paper*. Related readings.

CAS EN 103 Expository Composition I: *Concentrates on refining readings skills and such writing skills as formulating a thesis*, developing and organizing supporting material, and generating effective sentences. Frequent reading and writing assignments of varying length. Review of grammar.

CAS EN 104 Expository Composition II: Instruction in careful reading, critical thinking, and clear writing. *Practice in the development of a lively, detailed, and well-organized argument in support of a thesis*. Revision and documentation emphasized. Seven to eleven papers required.

CAS EN 201 Intermediate Composition

CAS EN 202 Introduction to Creative Writing

(italics added, Boston University, 122)

BU requires that all students must complete either EN 102 or 104 unless the student has exempted the English composition requirement through SAT or Advanced Placement Test scores, as some native speakers do<sup>1)</sup>. This is a University-wide requirement, regardless of which school or

department a student has enrolled in. With native English speakers the requirement is EN 104, with nonnatives EN 102. Native speakers are placed in either 103 or 104 on the basis of SAT scores. If a student gets placed in 103 (in preparation for 104), he/she must take 104 after taking 103; in this case two semesters of English composition are required.

EN 201: Intermediate Composition and EN 202: Introduction to Creative Writing are frequently taken. Some programs at BU require their students to take an advanced writing course (beyond the 104 requirement) and some require students to take a writing course even if they have fulfilled the 104 requirement through SAT or Advanced Placement Test scores. Still other students elect to take these because they feel that further supervised writing would be helpful to them.

## **2. The Placement of Nonnative English Speakers**

The placement of nonnative English speakers in composition courses is based on the placement test administered by Department of English. This test consists of a 45 minute grammar test (75 questions with four selections each) and an essay test (writing a short essay of 300-500 words, 3-5 paragraphs on a given topic in 50-60 minutes). Based on their performance on this test, nonnative students follow several courses. The feeling is that most nonnative speakers, no matter what their level of English proficiency, can benefit from an English composition class in which an instructor is paying very close attention to their writing, and in most cases two semesters at the university level are considered to be advisable. The normal sequence of courses is either EN 101-102 or bilingual sections of EN 103-104. Being judged to be above the level of EN 102 (the nonnative requirement) does not exempt a student from taking an English composition course.

EN 101-102 and EN 103-104 are actually parallel sequences and were conceived to meet the needs of students entering at different levels. The students who showed greater frequency of significant structural errors in the test are assigned to 101-102. Generally the 101-102 sequence has higher enrollment than 103-104. EN 101 and 103 focus on basic organization and development at both the paragraph and essay levels, whereas 102 and 104 focus on the writing of a research paper. In other words, 101 and 103 serve as introductory courses to 102 and 104 respectively, so there are some students who get exempt from 101 or 103 and go directly to 102 and 104. Usually nonnative students assigned to 103-104 go to bilingual sections of these courses, but there are a few whose writing is judged to be developed enough to go directly into a class with native English speakers. The minimum TOEFL score that could be evaluated as 101 would be probably around 580 and if a student is clearly not ready for college-level work in English, EOP EN 003 (a CELOP course with no credit) is recommended. Or if even weaker, an intensive course at CELOP is recommended. In these cases, students have to take 101-102 afterwards.

## **3. Class Schedule and Class Size**

Since the composition requirement is University-wide, there are a lot of sections of each course students can enroll in. For example, in Semester I Fall 1997 (approximately 15 class weeks), there are 10 sections for EN 101, 6 for 102, 12 (3 of which are for Bilingual Only) for 103, and 54 (3 of which are for Bilingual Only) for 104. Similarly, in Semester II Spring 1998 (approximately 15 class weeks), there are 6 sections for EN 101, 9 for 102, just 1 Bilingual Only for 103, and 42 (2

of which are for Bilingual Only) for 104. These sections fall into two types: the first type meets for one hour on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (three times a week), and the second type meets for one and a half hours on Tuesday and Thursday (twice a week). The meeting time of each section differs from one another: for instance, in Fall Semester, EN 101 Section A 1 met 12:00- 1:00 pm, Section B 1 met 1:00-2:00 pm, Section C 1 met 2:00-3:00 pm, each three days a week. In addition, more than two sections of EN 102 and 104 were offered in Summer Term 1997, which met one and a half hours five days a week. So this system is quite convenient for students: they can choose whichever semester they like and also the type and the meeting hour that fits their individual schedules. But this kind of thing is probably only possible in a large university like BU which has a large teaching staff and a lot of classrooms available.

The enrollment in the composition classes is limited to 15 students for ESL classes (EN 101, 102, bilingual sections of 103 and 104) and to 18 students for native speaker classes such as EN 104 because of the need of paying close attention to each student's writing. Nonnative students come from various countries as in the case of CELOP and generally there are at least two Japanese students in one ESL composition class.

#### **4. Overview of Composition Courses**

As stated above, EN 101-102 and EN 103-104 are parallel sequences, different in grammatical proficiency level. The goals of EN 101 and 103 are paragraph and essay coherence and development, which would include such topics as topic sentence, internal links within paragraphs, transitions between paragraphs, development and support of a thesis. In 102 and 104 students apply the skills honed in 101 or 103 to writing from sources. The conventions of quoting from and citing sources are taught in these two courses. Library work is required, and students demonstrate their ability to use sources to develop and support a thesis. While 101 and 103 include quite a lot of grammar instruction, 102 and 104 might take up structural issues as they arise in the students' writing.

Throughout these four courses, students get introduced to various types of writing and are encouraged to write them: beginning with Letter, Summary, Description, Narration, they gradually move to argumentative writing such as Review, Analysis, Comparison and Contrast, and Research. But first of all students have to do a lot of critical reading and thinking. Usually two kinds of course books are used in each course. The first kind is a grammar book (in the case of EN 101) or a handbook or manual of writing which tells you about grammar, punctuation, quotation, documentation style, etc. (in EN 102, 103, 104). These are used for exercises and for students' reference in writing. The other is a book of essays. Sometimes students read one of the essays to write a summary, but most often they are to read two or three essays which have different points of view on a current controversy, for example, "Should smoking be banned?" or "Is it right to identify AIDS victims?". Or sometimes students are shown a video program on a current topic. They read these essays or watch the video program, think and form their own opinions on the topic, and discuss the topic in groups. After going through this process they are to write down what they think in the form of an essay, and submit it to the instructor. After the instructor returns the essays to the students with comments and corrections, the students must resubmit the

essays with corrections.

In the courses of EN 102 and above, the methods of “peer workshop” and “peer review” are often used. Students are put in small two or three person groups to read one another’s papers. In a peer workshop they make comments on one another’s papers and in a peer review they have to write comments on the other member’s (members’) paper(s). Thus students can get feedback from fellow students and this helps them revise their papers. Also, in each course, “individual conferences” are given to each individual student two to four times. When these conferences are given, there is no regular class meeting but the instructor will have a 15-20 minute conference with every one of the students to discuss his/her papers and problems. Every student can get the instructor’s help this way.

All of these courses keep students pretty busy. In a section of EN 101, which I had a chance to observe, students had to submit 5 major essays of different kinds (3 pages each) plus other homework assignments during the course. In a section of EN 104 (for native English speakers), students had to submit Summary (2-3 pages), Letter (2-3 pages), Movie Review (3-5 pages), Advertisement Analysis (4-6 pages), 3 Peer Reviews (3 pages each) and finally, Research and Argument Paper (5-8 pages). For the final paper the students had to research a current issue (such as “Should wolves be reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park?” or “Should late-term abortions be banned?”, etc.). They had to look through 8-15 articles in the library, and write an argumentative paper supporting one or the other side of the controversy with footnotes and a Bibliography at the end of the paper. This course seemed indeed tough even for native speakers and actually some of the students dropped out on the way.

## 5. On Observing Some Composition Classes

I observed several classes of EN 101, 102, 103 (the bilingual section) and 104 (for native English speakers). There are a few things which I thought quite impressive.

First of all, just as in the case of CELOP, smallness of classes and its effectiveness must be noted. These composition courses keep not only students but also instructors very busy. They have to keep correcting students’ papers and making comments all the time. So if you want to keep the quality of instructors’ work, classes should be small. In addition, since these courses demand a lot of work from students, instructors must be in close contact with each student (by individual conferences, etc.) to have the student stay on track. Even with this effort, some students do drop out. So it is actually smallness of the classes that makes the composition courses work.

Secondly, students here are much encouraged to take the initiative in class. Unlike in a Japanese classroom, it is not enough for them just to sit silent or to do the given exercises, but they are required to think themselves, have their own opinions ready and speak out. They are encouraged to participate in group discussions, peer workshops or peer reviews, thus contributing to one another and also to the whole class. Consequently they are more active than students in a Japanese classroom.

The third point I want to make is related to the second point. In contrast with Japanese college students, who are generally treated more as youth than as adults, students here are treated as adults who can take their own responsibility. Since participation is essential in these courses, the

attendance policy and the late paper policy are very strict. Usually more than two or three absences without an excuse (illness or emergency) over the course of the semester are regarded as excessive and penalized. Late papers are also subject to significant penalty unless there are major mitigating circumstances explained to the instructor prior to the due date. Students are supposed to take the initiative in contacting the instructor in any case.

Lastly, I want to point out the good academic help BU provides students for writing. The Writing Center is located in University Resource Center. It is staffed with graduate Writing Fellows from a variety of disciplines to help students with grammar, style, documentation, essays and research papers. Tutors are also available here. The Martin Luther King Center provides Learning Disability Support Services. For word processing students can go to Mac Lab in University Resource Center or to Information Technology Center, etc. Even psychological counseling is available at The Martin Luther King Center. Though composition courses might be sometimes hard, BU students have a plentiful resources to support their writing.

#### **IV. Some thoughts on the Problem of Class Size**

##### **1. The Difference in Class Size Between Japan and the US**

In addition to BU, I had chances to observe several ESL classes at English Language Institute at University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, Michigan), at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts), and also at Wentworth Institute of Technology (Boston, Massachusetts). Their classes are also very small. At English Language Institute, University of Michigan, there are usually 15-22 students in a writing class, 11-15 students in a speaking class, and 5-6 students in a pronunciation class. AT MIT there are 10-20 students in a writing class, and at Wentworth Institute of Technology, a moderate-sized private institute, they have 20-30 students in a writing class. I hear these small classes are nothing special in the US. Among other things it seems to me that class size is one of the biggest differences between Japanese and American ESL education, so I would like to dwell on this point.

In Japan, the “number of 40-50 as the standard class size has been current since the Meiji Restoration Period” (LoCastro, 1989:17) and this size “imposed by the Ministry of Education” (Takayama, 1997: 133) has long been accepted as a matter of course. With this number of students in one class, the traditional grammar-translation method was predominant in Japan as the only somehow workable method, until recently with “a growing need of introducing communicative English teaching” in Japanese schools, teachers of English came to be keenly aware of the issue of class size (Takayama, 1997:130). According to *A General Survey of English Language Teaching in Japan : Separate Volume*, 65.2% of English instructors in Japanese colleges and universities (564 instructors out of 865) said that they were dissatisfied with their current class size (1990:138). Only 7.9% (76 out of 963) thought that their classes were small enough and 85% (819 out of 963) showed preference for teaching smaller size classes (152). In an extensive survey dealing with international comparison of class size, Coleman reports that teachers’ perceived ideal class size is 21.5 students, that with 38.2 students teachers think problems begin to develop, and that with 51.5 students classes become intolerable for teachers (1989:15).

How about students? Are they satisfied with their current class size? 10,313 Japanese college and university students answered as follows when they were asked about the class size they would like.

2.6% (265)	with more than 50 students
7.5% (770)	with 41-50 students
20.7% (2,135)	with 31-40 students
34.0% (3,502)	with 21-30 students
35.3% (3,641)	with 20 students or less

(Koike, 170)

This shows that only about 10% of the students were satisfied with a class larger than 41 students: 90% of them wanted a class smaller than 40. 69.3% wanted a class smaller than 30 and 35.3% (the largest percentage of the students) wanted a class of 20 or less. So it is obvious that both teachers and students prefer small classes. A class with 20 students or less would be ideal, 30 desirable, 40 probably the largest class tolerable.

## 2. Why are Large Classes Problematic for Language Teaching?

A large class with 60 students might not be so problematic for a lecture where a professor tries to give students some knowledge or information. But in a language class the interaction between the instructor and each student is absolutely necessary. In order to learn a language well, students have to use it as much as possible. So the instructor tries to stimulate each student to practice the language, express himself/herself in it, and tries to give the right feedback. And the instructor needs to make the instruction as personalized (individualized) as possible to each student. But to make this kind of interaction or to make any interaction at all with every student in a large class is almost impossible. The instructor “typically will ask a question, a student will respond, and then” the instructor “reacts, correcting, praising, or commenting in some way” (LoCastro, 1988: 9-10). But in a class with 40-60 students, while the instructor is interacting with one student, asking several questions, it is often difficult to keep the other students (those who are not in the “hot seat”) attentive: some of them will fall asleep or begin to chat with the neighbors. Also, there is much difficulty in monitoring so many students’ work and in giving the right feedback: especially with composition courses correcting a large number of essays in a short time could be such a demanding work to instructors. Consequently, instead of providing students an environment where they can have ample opportunity for meaningful practice and to express their individuality, in the worst case a large language class could become like “an all-day puppet show where participants from time to time mentally leave the scene of action to attend to other needs” (LoCastro, 1988: 10).

## 3. Some Possible Solutions to the Problem of Large Classes

What could be some solutions to the problem of large classes? The best solution is, of course, to make them smaller: 40 students in a reading class, 30 students in a writing class, and 20-30 in a speaking class. But since the problem of class size is related to financial concerns, we might have to wait for some time before small classes become common in Japanese colleges and universities.



Until that day comes, what could be done to make our ESL classes better? Is there any way to conquer large classes? Below are some possible ways to make large classes a little more effective.

(1) By making the results of language study more “immediate and tangible” so that students can see immediate results of their learning. This could be done “by using goal-oriented activities, such as problem-solving, information-gap, and game activities.” In this way we could have “a better chance of maintaining student interest” (Luckett, 1988:14) and thus making them more active in class.

(2) By dividing students into small groups or pairs. This way students could help or correct one another and learn themselves to some extent, though careful monitoring by the instructor is necessary.

(3) By letting students know that not only the results in written exams but also their participation in class really matters in their final grades, that just sitting silent in class won’t do, we may be able to get more response from students and make them more active.

The point is to make students more active, to make them take the initiative in class and all of the methods above would be helpful in attaining this objective, though that would not necessarily lessen the instructor’s work.

(4) By making full use of a Computer Assisted Language Learning Laboratory (CALL Lab), we could combine all these methods and provide students a better environment. We could run an English program on the computer network and let each student see the score he/she gets on the monitor screen: they can see immediate results of their learning. Also, by using the computer network, it is easier for the instructor to monitor each student’s (or group’s) work. Using computers, students could easily make their own materials in groups that would keep them interested. But even with all these advantages, we must not forget that computers are not almighty. First, it is sometimes possible that computers get deceived by students. In fact, some students did manage to get a good score on a program by doing only a part of the exercises, instead of all. So constant monitoring by the instructor is necessary. Secondly, even with the help of computers, such work as correcting a large number of students’ essays would be still pretty demanding. Computers can help with spell checking and clear writing, but only the instructor can check grammar, paragraph and essay coherence and development and content. Human touches and useful advice are imperative. So small classes are desirable to keep the quality of instructors’ feedback. Lastly, students are learning a language to communicate with people, not with machines, so that even in a CALL Lab the interaction between the instructor and students is the first thing. I remember that though all of the universities and institutes I visited in the US used computer labs, they played only the subsidiary part in ESL education. First came small classes. In a language class, I believe, it should be that students play first fiddle, the instructor second, and computers third.

## V. Conclusion

Observing ESL classes in the US helped me reconsider our ESL education in Japan. I would

like to share this invaluable experience with my colleagues and try to make most of it in our ESL classes.

### Notes

- 1) I hear it has already been established that from September 1999 no native English speakers, regardless of their SAT or Advanced Placement scores, will be exempt from a required course in composition.

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