

# Curriculum, Collaboration, and Coaching: A Multi-Faceted Approach to Study Abroad Preparation

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## Abstract

The American College Readiness Track was created as part of an intensive English study abroad program in order to prepare female Japanese students for matriculation at universities that use English as the medium of instruction. This paper describes the specific goals of this academic track and the development of its curriculum using a backward design approach. The paper also explains the process used in selecting faculty to teach in the track, the professional development activities organized to prepare those faculty members for their assignments, and the ways in which the faculty collaborated to further develop and improve the track. In addition, the paper discusses the introduction of coaching into the American College Readiness Track. Coaching is defined, and its benefits are described. Cultural considerations, for example, the reinforcement of hierarchy inherent in the Japanese language and Japanese students' relative reticence in the classroom environment are also discussed in relation to their impact on the coaching process.

*Key words: TESOL, study abroad preparation, backward design, teacher collaboration, coaching*

In 2019, Showa Boston Institute (SBI), the study abroad campus of Showa Women's University (SWU), developed the American College Readiness Track (ACRT) in order to better prepare students for coursework at universities which use English as the medium of instruction (EMI). This included universities in countries where English is the primary language as well as institutions in other countries. The development of the track was undertaken due to the increasing need in recent years for such targeted preparation, not only at SWU but at universities across Japan. In part, this need is a consequence of the growing focus in Japanese education on the enrollment of Japanese students at non-Japanese universities and the enrollment of international students at Japanese institutions (Central Council for Education Working Group on Internationalization of Universities, 2014; MEXT, n. d.; Office for Student Exchange, 2010; Rose & McKinley, 2017; see also McCarthy, 2021). This paper will examine some of the specific challenges faced in developing an academic track for students planning to attend EMI institutions and will explain how the Showa Boston Institute administration and faculty teaching in the track collaborated in order to meet those challenges. In particular, the paper will discuss the curriculum design, including scheduling issues related to the balance of class hours and study hours; the hiring process followed to ensure that the most suitable candidates were assigned to the track; and the coaching used to help students build the self-awareness and confidence needed to succeed in the track

and, ultimately, at EMI institutions.

## **Curriculum**

### **Scheduling**

In beginning to plan the American College Readiness Track, scheduling and the awarding of credits were major considerations, and careful planning was necessary to ensure that related requirements in Japan and the United States were fulfilled. In particular, one issue that had to be taken into account was that schedules at EMI universities typically involve fewer course hours and more outside reading than those at Japanese universities. Because Showa Women's University grants academic credit for Showa Boston Institute courses, courses in ACRT, like all SBI courses, had to fit the framework set by SWU and approved by MEXT. According to that framework, a typical SBI student might take nine courses in one semester (Showa Women's University, 2018). In contrast, at English-language universities, full-time students generally take four to five courses per semester (Endicott College, 2021; Temple University, Japan Campus, n. d.; The University of Queensland, Australia, n. d.). Regardless of the type of institution, however, the total number of hours that students devote to their courses is relatively comparable when one considers that although English-language universities require fewer class hours, each class typically includes more outside reading (Eades, 2016; Lee-Cunin, 2005). For students whose native language is not English (e.g., SWU students), this focus on outside reading presents a noteworthy challenge, as reading speed can be significantly reduced when reading in a second language (Busby & Dahl, 2021; Fraser, 2007; Mora et al., 2021; Nation, 2005; Segalowitz, 2003; Taguchi et al., 2016; Tran, 2012).

In order to deal with the issues of required class hours and lengthy readings, ACRT courses were paired (e.g., Reading was paired with Grammar and Writing, Discussion of American Issues was paired with New England Studies) so that assigned readings could be shared between two courses, allowing a more manageable workload in each course while potentially doubling the class time available to cover the topics in those readings in more depth.

### **Emphasis on Expected Outcomes**

With the scheduling framework for the American College Readiness Track in place, individual courses were developed, using a backward design approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, 2012). In this model, the first step is to identify the expected outcomes (i.e., what students should be able to do with what they've learned by the end of the course). The next step is to choose the means of assessment that will be used to determine whether students have met those outcomes. Once the outcomes and means of assessment have been clarified, decisions are made about course materials and teaching methods. As the name implies, backward design contrasts with approaches that focus on first deciding the course content and materials (forward design) or the activities and teaching methods (central design) (Richards, 2013).

The benefits of backward design on both teacher development and student learning have been shown in studies by Hodaieian and Biria (2015), Hosseini et al. (2019), Korotchenko et al. (2015),

Ontaneda and Román (2019), and Yurtseven and Altun (2017); see also Alvarez (2020). At Showa Boston Institute specifically, the approach has been successful in meeting the standards set by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), which emphasize student learning outcomes and the assessment of those outcomes (Commission on English Language Program Accreditation, 2022).

In creating the curriculum for the American College Readiness Track, the academic directors felt that a backward design approach would be particularly suitable because the desired outcomes were implicit in the rationale for the track's creation (i.e., preparing students to perform successfully at EMI institutions).

## **Faculty**

### **Hiring**

The approach used in designing the curriculum for the American College Readiness Track also influenced the approach used in hiring for the track. In order to ensure that the outcome-based curriculum was delivered effectively, the academic directors sought to recruit instructors who demonstrated familiarity with and interest in outcome-based teaching and assessment. In most cases, these instructors were selected from among the current faculty. However, some instructors were hired from outside the institution. In either case, the directors made an effort to focus the recruitment process on criteria such as experience with outcome-based teaching and assessment rather than on employment status, including differences in status among existing faculty (e.g., seniority, part-time vs. full-time). Therefore, the first step of the hiring process involved a single-blind review of the candidates' applications. Applications were submitted to a staff member who then passed them on to the academic directors without revealing the candidates' names.

### ***Application Stage***

The application form itself was designed to give candidates an understanding of the purpose of the American College Readiness Track and to show their suitability for teaching in it. The form included an overview of the track's mission, a list of the courses with their proposed outcomes, and the general expectations for teaching in the track. Applicants were asked to choose an outcome from the list and respond in writing to the following questions:

- What activities would you use to address the outcome you have chosen?
- How would you assess the attainment of this outcome?

Applicants were then asked to write an additional outcome for the course that included the outcome they had chosen. The directors reviewed all applications and rated them according to how well the candidates' responses demonstrated their ability to develop and assess the expected outcomes for the track. The directors read the applications independently and then conferred to select the candidates who would move on to the interview stage of the hiring process. Both directors felt that the blind review of applications was a strongpoint of the recruitment process, as it focused their attention on the candidates'

curriculum- and assessment-related skills and reduced unconscious bias.

### ***Interview Stage***

During the interview stage, candidates had the opportunity to explain their understanding of outcome-based teaching and assessment in greater depth. In addition, candidates were asked about their experience and interest in working collaboratively, which were considered particularly important since paired courses would share outcomes and materials, and all courses in the track would share a set of goals. The candidates who most successfully met the hiring criteria based on their interviews were offered teaching positions in the track.

The interview process was valuable in showing the candidates' level of understanding of various aspects of curriculum development, assessment, and collaborative planning and teaching. All candidates who were hired for the track demonstrated some degree of knowledge in these areas. However, the level of familiarity with any particular concept varied among the group. Therefore, professional development workshops were organized to provide teachers with additional training in key areas related to the track.

### **Professional Development**

During the first three years of ACRT, teachers were required to meet before the start of the semester for professional development and collaborative planning. Throughout the semester, they were required to meet monthly with the ACRT administrative coordinator (one of the academic directors). A block of time was reserved in the schedule for these monthly meetings, and ACRT teachers were provided with a stipend for this additional work.

Professional development activities for teachers in the track included a two-session workshop on backward design and workshops related to content that students would be likely to encounter in American classrooms (e.g., social justice, immigration, and political issues).

In addition to facilitating professional development opportunities for the ACRT teachers, having this block available in the schedule benefitted the track and the institutions in other ways. When there were no activities scheduled in the reserved slot, ACRT students and teachers could use the time to take advantage of unanticipated academic opportunities that arose, such as off-campus lectures or events connected to content covered in ACRT classes. Additionally, non-ACRT faculty were invited to attend the professional development workshops organized for teachers in the track, and many did attend, increasing overall faculty awareness of topics related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

### **Collaboration**

As a result of the professional development activities organized for the track, the knowledge and skills that the ACRT faculty could apply in developing the track's curriculum grew both deeper and more uniform. As the interview process showed, the teachers selected for positions in the track shared a desire to work collaboratively in developing the curriculum, and the meeting time reserved in the schedule made it easier for them to carry out this work.

Collaborative work undertaken by the ACRT faculty included the integration of course themes and

the finalization of course descriptions. In writing course descriptions, in particular, ACRT faculty put to use the knowledge of backward design they had gained through professional development workshops, as each course description was based on student learning outcomes and included course goals, objectives, lists of materials and resources, and assessment rubrics.

In their collaborative work, ACRT teachers also developed a list of skills, including critical thinking skills, that they considered valuable in preparing students for success at EMI institutions and could reasonably be addressed in ACRT courses in one semester.

This list included:

- Identifying different levels of depth of thought regarding the formation of oral and written responses/comments
- Supporting one's ideas with evidence
- Assessing the credibility of sources
- Practicing active participation skills such as challenging another's ideas, back-channeling, paraphrasing, and disagreeing in seminar-type discussions
- Independently editing written work for a predetermined set of errors prior to submission
- Practicing specific high-volume reading and notetaking strategies
- Practicing making connections such as text to self, text to text, and text to world, working with high-level academic content
- Analyzing and synthesizing information from multiple sources
- Creating a scholarly thesis statement and annotated bibliography

These skills were introduced and reinforced in courses through themes such as education, social justice, politics, immigration, and food insecurity, and teachers worked collaboratively to develop a plan specifying when these themes would be covered in various courses. According to teacher feedback, this type of collaboration helped students understand the importance of making connections between courses in order to achieve the expected course outcomes.

### **Improvements Resulting from Teacher Feedback**

In addition to the regular ACRT meetings, a debrief meeting was held at the end of each ACRT semester to gather teacher feedback and identify areas for improvement. As a result of these meetings, three new features were eventually added to the track. First, teachers created an oral interview process for selecting ACRT students from among those who qualified based on academic scores. Teachers also created their own ACRT student orientation to clarify the academic and socio-emotional expectations of the track. Lastly, it was agreed that ACRT teachers should incorporate off-campus resources, including academic partnerships at local universities, into their classes in order to promote exchange between students in the track and their American peers.

Several additional recommendations were made by the ACRT faculty and administrators to enhance

future hiring for the track. One recommendation was to add at least one current ACRT teacher to the interview phase of the hiring process so that candidates could speak directly with an ACRT classroom teacher. Another suggestion was to assign peer-mentors to new ACRT teachers. Lastly, ACRT teachers recommended that the track's course descriptions be shared with both the wider SBI faculty and the SWU faculty. This would allow the SWU faculty to build on the specific skills addressed in the track and to create related outcomes for ACRT students once they returned to the home campus. On the Boston side, the work produced by the ACRT teachers partly as a result of their targeted professional development could serve as a model for other teachers in their committee work, specifically, the creation of outcomes and assessments and the planning of professional development activities.

## **Coaching**

### **What is Coaching?**

In addition to the improvements made to the American College Readiness Track based on faculty feedback, in the track's third year, coaching was incorporated into ACRT. This change was made in order to support students' development of greater self-awareness and motivation, which ACRT administrators felt would help increase students' chances for success in the academic environment of EMI institutions.

When addressing the introduction of coaching into the track, it may be useful to first clarify what is meant by the term "coaching." The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (International Coaching Federation, 2021, section 2). Unlike advising, which is also used at Showa Boston Institute, coaching is student-driven. It does not rely on a curriculum with set topics. Instead, the coachee provides the agenda for coaching sessions, and the coach gives advice only when the coachee specifically asks for it.

### **The Effects of Coaching**

Research indicates that coaching has a positive effect on students' metacognitive skills, including study skills and time management (Howlett et al., 2021). In addition, it has been connected to higher grades and improved adjustment to new models of learning (Owens, 2011). Specifically, Owens' study showed that when international students in Australia, through coaching, examined their learning styles and expectations, comparing them to those typical of Australian students and professors, their GPAs increased, and they showed better adjustment to the host country's model of learning.

### **Considerations for Japanese Students**

In the context of ACRT, administrators viewed coaching as a means of facilitating students' adjustment to differences between the typical learning model in Japan and the models that they would encounter at EMI institutions. One particularly noteworthy difference among these is the relative passivity of Japanese students in comparison to the more active role that students in the West are commonly expected to play. As various studies have illustrated, students from Confucian-influenced

cultures, which include Japan, tend toward passivity due to a reluctance to stand out, create disharmony, or challenge teachers' authority (Li & Liu, 2011; Ota, 2013; McCarthy, 2021; Pratt et al., 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Among Japanese students in particular, this tendency has been described by Albertson (2020), Cutrone (2010), and Smirles (2017).

The emphasis in Japanese culture on group dynamics and maintaining harmony, which influences the degree of passivity among Japanese students, is apparent when one views Japan in terms of Hofstede's model. "The Hofstede model, or the 6-D Model of National Culture, is a way of understanding the culture of a country based on its cultural values" (Hofstede Insights, n. d. -a, section 7). While the model was originally developed for a cross-cultural business context, the insight it provides into cultural differences can be instructive in understanding cross-cultural issues in various settings. According to the model, national culture is comprised of the following six dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Orientation, and Indulgence. On the dimension of Individualism (i.e., the extent to which a culture prioritizes the individual over the group), Japan rates particularly low in comparison to English-speaking countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Japan scores 46, while the other nations score 90, 89, and 91, respectively (Hofstede Insights, n. d. -b).

Another important factor affecting the classroom behavior of Japanese students is the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship in Japan, which is reflected in the use of what Matsumoto (1988) calls "relation-acknowledging devices." A particularly relevant example is the honorific "*sensei*," which students use when addressing teachers. This tendency for Japanese speakers to adjust their language based on the relative status of the interlocutors is further explained by Cui et al. (2022) and Pizziconi (2011).

Given the cultural differences that ACRT students would likely face when attending EMI institutions, ACRT administrators felt that it was necessary to provide them with strategies for improving their metacognition. As Chick (2013) explains, "Metacognition is, put simply, thinking about one's thinking." More specifically, metacognition involves becoming aware of one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner and using that awareness to improve one's learning. In the context of ACRT, such strategies would increase students' awareness of the reasons behind their classroom behavior (e.g., their reluctance to speak out in class). Administrators believed that, as a consequence of developing this awareness, students would gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and drawbacks of their traditional learning style when applied in the context of a Western academic setting.

## **The American College Readiness Track's Coaching Program**

### ***The Coach***

The ACRT coach was a bilingual Japanese-American certified by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). She had been working with female Japanese students for over 23 years, mentoring, counseling, and providing leadership training to students, first, as Showa Boston Institute's director of student life, and later as its director of program development and marketing. The coach was an existing

salaried employee and therefore did not require an additional stipend.

At the time of the study, the coach was also working with the American partner universities that accept exchange students from SWU. Therefore, she was in a position to receive feedback from the host universities regarding the types of students who had been successful at those institutions, and could share that feedback with ACRT students who were considering studying at American universities. Additionally, the coach had access to the ACRT goals, course descriptions, and teachers. As a result, she was familiar with what students were studying and what challenges they were facing.

### ***The Coaching Model***

The coach followed the Four-Square Model, a sequential model of strength-based coaching developed by Robert Hicks (2017). In strength-based coaching, the coach helps the coachee identify, analyze, and leverage personal strengths in order to address issues and, ultimately, accomplish goals. To this end, coaches use various tools, including the Strength/Weakness/Opportunities/Threat (SWOT) analysis (TC Global, 2023), which helps coachees identify and list areas in which they excel, areas in which they need improvement, opportunities they could take in order to advance toward their goals, and issues that may hinder them from achieving their goals. Another coaching tool is the VIA Character Strengths Survey (VIA Institute on Character, 2023), which identifies coachees' strengths by asking them to rate their level of agreement with a variety of statements designed to assess personal traits. An item on the VIA Character Strengths Survey may, for example, assess respondents' tendency to come up with new and creative ideas. Both the SWOT analysis and the VIA survey were used in coaching the ACRT students.

In the Four-Square Model, the coach typically begins with the Support-for-Thought phase and moves successively through the phases of Challenge-for-Thought, Support-for-Action, and Challenge-for-Action, using open-ended questions and active listening. The Support-for-Thought phase has three objectives: for the coach and the coachee to establish a rapport, for the coach to assist the coachee in setting the coaching agenda, and to clarify the current situation faced by the coachee. In the Challenge-for-Thought phase, the coach helps the coachee define the desired outcomes, identifies discrepancies between the current situation and those outcomes, and questions negative self-talk. During the Support-for-Action phase, the coach supports the coachee in creating and solidifying the motivational foundation for the intended actions, having the coachee identify the drawbacks of the status quo and the benefits of taking action. In the Challenge-for-Action phase, the coachee designs specific action experiments, explores ways to avoid or overcome roadblocks, identifies resources, and creates a self-accountability plan.

### ***Logistics***

The introduction of coaching at Showa Boston Institute took place in the fall of 2021. Normally, ACRT students spend 14 weeks studying on the Boston campus. However, in 2021, due to COVID-related restrictions, all ACRT students spent the first seven weeks of the program in Japan, attending classes on Zoom. In the second half of the program, students had the option to travel to the Boston campus or continue attending online. Of the fourteen ACRT students, nine chose to study in Boston, and five remained in Japan, one of whom withdrew from the program mid-semester, leaving a final group of thirteen.



All coaching sessions were conducted on Zoom, including sessions held after students had arrived in Boston. Zoom was used due to concerns over COVID transmission and in order to maximize the number of time slots available to students (until 10 p.m.). Coaching sessions lasted 45 to 60 minutes.

Coaching began with a mandatory group orientation session which covered the following topics: what coaching is and what it is not, how it works, examples of coaching topics, responsibilities of the coachee and the coach, the confidentiality protocol, and how to schedule additional sessions. Following the orientation, students were required to attend at least one individual coaching session, which all students did. Students could then request additional individual sessions. The orientation and most students' first individual session took place within the first four weeks of the program, before any of the students had arrived in Boston.

After the group orientation session and prior to the first individual session, students were asked to complete a Strength/Weakness/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis of themselves and take the online VIA Character Strengths Survey. During the first individual coaching session, the coach and the student introduced themselves and reviewed the coach-coachee agreement that was explained in the group orientation. The student then shared the results of the SWOT analysis and VIA survey, to the extent they were comfortable, and their thoughts and reflections about those results. During any subsequent coaching sessions, the coach and student occasionally referred back to the student's strengths which had been identified by these instruments (e.g., kindness and teamwork). At the end of any coaching session, the student came up with an action plan and accountability strategies. Students were told that it was their responsibility to bring a topic they wanted to work on to each session, a requirement that all students met.

#### *Using English Versus Using Japanese*

Given that the coach and all of the students were native Japanese speakers, it would have been easier for the students to speak in Japanese during the coaching sessions. However, the coach decided to use English during the sessions in order to maintain a language environment similar to that of an American university. The reasons were threefold. First, English was used in order to reduce the reinforcement of hierarchy inherent in the Japanese language, discussed in the "Considerations for Japanese Students" section of this paper.

Second, the coach wanted to give students as many opportunities as possible to use English in an authentic way. Particularly for students who did not travel to Boston, coaching sessions were one of the few opportunities they had to use English outside of class. This could explain why 75 percent of the online-only students requested two additional coaching sessions after the first mandatory session, while only 11 percent of the students who stayed on the Boston campus did.

#### *Questions Used in the Sessions*

During the coaching sessions, the coach would ask questions including the following in order to promote self-awareness:

- What makes it difficult for you to speak up in class?

- What do you really want from ACRT?
- How do you want to be in the classroom?

In addition, the coach would ask questions that could facilitate the development of an action plan, such as:

- What are the pros and cons of remaining in the status quo?
- How could you leverage your strengths to achieve what you want?
- What would be the best action plan for you?
- How would you be accountable to yourself?

Through coaching, students examined their wants, for example, speaking up more in class or increasing their self-confidence. They explored ways to actualize these desires and developed specific goals they would implement and be accountable for.

### **Considerations for the Future**

The most significant aspect of this coaching program was the holistic and collaborative approach that promoted the development of students' metacognition. Good coaching helps students examine themselves, their culture, and their assumptions objectively and critically, aiding them in developing the courage and commitment needed to make changes that will allow them to reach their goals efficiently.

In a study abroad program such as Showa Boston Institute's, coaching can complement the cognitive-level learning that takes place in the classroom by tapping into students' self-motivation at the metacognitive level. This can be a valuable step in helping students become the type of learners they want to be and can have a lasting impact on their overall development.

Coaching at the Boston campus was an experiment with a very small group of female college students, within a short timeframe. Further empirical research on this type of support program for Japanese EFL students is warranted.

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