

Design, Implementation, and Observations of a Worldview-Centered ESP Course

世界観を中心とした ESP コースのデザイン、実践、および考察

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Abstract

This research note describes the design, implementation, and preliminary observations of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP), a B2-level reading and writing course centered on the study of worldviews at a Japanese university. While English language education in Japan emphasizes intercultural competence and global citizenship, practical methods for achieving these goals remain underdeveloped. The course addressed this gap by introducing students to religious, philosophical, and political worldviews while developing English reading, discussion, and academic writing skills. Implemented across Law, Literature, and Commerce departments, the course utilized reading circles, reflective writing, presentations, and essays to encourage examination of both personal and alternative perspectives. Students explored foundational questions concerning human origins, meaning, morality, and destiny through a variety of readings and discussions. The paper focuses on the pedagogical rationale, course design, and classroom implementation of worldview-centered instruction. Classroom observations and informal student feedback suggested increased engagement with worldview questions, greater awareness of underlying assumptions, and willingness to reflect on personal beliefs. Because student work was not collected for research purposes, these observations are presented as descriptive reflections rather than systematic evidence of learning outcomes. Challenges related to perspective-taking, authentic intercultural interaction, and assessment are discussed. The paper argues that worldview-focused content offers a practical framework for integrating intercultural competence development into university English language instruction.

Keywords

ELT, Intercultural Communication, worldview, culture, curriculum design

1. Introduction

When English Language Teaching (ELT) is tied to a wide range of goals and outcomes in university education, there is so much to do with so little time. In the context of Japanese universities, raising students' skill levels and competency in English is the primary goal, with a multitude of approaches suggested to do so. In addition, educators must attend to underlying goals beyond linguistic competency or standardized test measurement. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) hopes that English education will develop students capable of smooth intercultural communication, defined as an "accurate understanding of partner's thoughts and intentions based on his/her cultural and social background, logical and reasoned explanation of one's own views, and convincing partners in course of debates" (MEXT, 2011, p.3). Yet there is no guidance or suggestion of how students would: (a) gain enough cultural and social knowledge to infer the thoughts and intentions of anyone they meet and (b) take time to understand their beliefs and assumptions enough to defend them against opposing viewpoints.

Some time has passed since this proposal, but a disconnect between goals and implementation due to teacher proficiency and test-focused curriculum constraints still persists (Smith, 2025). Glasgow and Paller (2016) outline how ELT practitioners struggle to interpret and enact these vague and sometimes confusing initiatives. Policy intent can be lost in a trickle-down effect from the government to curriculum design and goals in higher education, to textbook and materials selection, down to how each individual teacher manages their courses.

Apart from policy objectives and curriculum requirements, instructors have developed an awareness of the need to teach intercultural communicative competence (ICC; Byram, 1997), linking cultural knowledge with linguistic competency and appropriate language choices. Intercultural competence (IC) also extends beyond grammatical or linguistic competence. One summary of IC highlights the need for "skills of interpreting cultures and relating cultures to one another; empathy; multiperspectivity; cognitive flexibility; and skills in critically evaluating cultural perspectives, practices and products, including those of one's own culture" and "knowledge of cultural perspectives" (Barrett, 2011, p.3). If instructors have these implicit IC goals, when and how could they find adequate time to teach both knowledge and skills while fulfilling English language course requirements?

This paper details an example of a course aimed at increasing university students' cultural knowledge and skills of identifying and evaluating cultural perspectives of oneself and others. The course was a special elective that also met the requirements of a 1-year reading/writing

class for second-year university students. Separate reading/writing and speaking/listening courses are required for all first- and second-year students. This course, in its first year of implementation, was English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and offered to students of different departments who tested to the advanced level. More than improving academic reading and writing skills, the ESP focuses on reading, analysis, reflection, and debate of content-specific readings and the development of research and writing skills for a cohesive thesis. The subject should relate to each department's specific area of study or future career.

2. Curriculum Design and Implementation

2.1 What Is a Worldview?

"Worldview" in English gained prominence as a translation of the term *weltanschauung* used by Immanuel Kant (Naugle, 2002). While philosophers disagree on its definition (Vidal, 2012), a wide range of thinkers have found it a useful concept: Nietzsche in describing nihilism (Ansell-Pearson, 1994); Orr and Kuypers in defense of Christianity (Sire, 2014); and Foucault as a postmodernist (Foucault, 1984). Beyond a perspective or way of looking at the world, worldview is a set of assumptions about the reality behind beliefs or behaviors (Hiebert, 2006). These assumptions may be unquestioned and inexplicit (Olthuis, 1989), but they are also commitments of each individual (Sire, 2014). Sire identifies eight questions that a worldview answers, while Apostel and Van der Veken's framework (as cited in Vidal, 2008) falls into six questions. Drawing on these frameworks, the instructor synthesized these ideas into four pedagogically accessible questions for classroom use:

1. *Origin*: Where do I come from?
2. *Meaning*: What does my life really mean?
3. *Morality*: How do I distinguish between good and evil?
4. *Destiny*: What happens to humans when they die?

The other questions offered by Sire (2014) and Vidal (2008) would be raised through examination of these four. For example, questions about the nature of reality would be addressed when students consider the origin of the universe or the afterlife, and "What is a human?" is considered in answering the origin of human beings and all life.

Worldviews were approached broadly in the selection of readings (Appendices 1 and 2), whether from philosophies (naturalism, secularism, poststructuralism) or religions (Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity). This design aligns with trends in European countries that required Religious Education (RE) as a part of global citizenship courses before shifting to a Religion

and Worldviews (RW) approach. Pett (2024) and Plater (2025) support the development of RW with an emphasis on the distinction of personal worldviews versus institutional or organized worldviews, including religions and philosophies. An individual's lived experiences as a worldview may be influenced by but not completely adhere to all aspects of a religion or philosophy. In the ESP course, this difference was not addressed explicitly, but “worldview” was used as a catch-all phrase applied to religions, philosophies, and personal beliefs that exhibit a mixture of influences.

2.2 Why Study Worldviews?

If Religion and Worldviews Education is used for nurturing global citizenship in required European courses, it can also stimulate intercultural competence and Barrett's (2011) aforementioned goals of multiperspectivity. Worldviews provide a peek behind the curtain of one's own culture and others' cultures. They are foundational but often unexamined assumptions that undergird cultural differences. On the first day of the course, students were asked to read a hypothetical situation where they must choose between taking their best friend or a senior in their high school club to a concert. What seems like a simple exercise on expressing preferences and reasons later reveals the framework for making that decision. While some might select the senior out of a sense of obligation or gratitude, the majority opt for their best friend due to a higher level of personal comfort. Upon further questioning, participants often explain that the relationship with a senior is formal, requiring a specific display of respect. The philosophy behind the curtain is Confucianism, brought from China to Japan, where unequal vertical relationships were introduced. A part of students' personal modern worldview has roots in an ancient philosophy, but cultures not influenced by Confucianism could have a different framework in making this decision.

A second reason for exploring worldviews is the lack of RW education in Japan. The Japanese constitution forbids formal religious education in public schools (Japan Const. art.20). Even though this is an element of the U.S.-influenced postwar constitution, non-religion (*mushukyo*) coupled with formal instruction of Shinto, Confucianism, and social ethics in moral education was a feature of pre-war education (Luhmer, 1990). Before university, Japanese students will have understood major religions primarily as movements in history and through their cultural products, such as in art. However, without having studied basic beliefs or reading original religious texts, students may not be able to articulate how a person believing in religion A would answer the four basic questions of worldview or the reasons for those answers.

Exploring worldviews encourages self-awareness in students. Takayama (2023) outlines postwar Japanese language and moral education as a mixture of implicit Shinto teachings and a competing liberal emphasis on rationality and critical thinking. This creates a dichotomy of learning self-dissolution and one's insignificance vis-à-vis an independent self full of potential. With this background, students may have internalized parts of these differing belief systems. Exploring the roots of these influences, students are able to recognize, perhaps for the first time, what has shaped their personal worldviews. They are also faced with the task of examining the ontological tensions that may exist in their worldviews.

The curriculum opens with naturalism, introducing the concept that life can be explained entirely through natural occurrences and the absence of supernatural explanations or causes. First, this introduces the idea that naturalism is one of many ways of thinking and has a set of beliefs attached to it. Naturalism may have been accepted as a usual belief without challenge previously. The next reading introduces Shinto as a belief system: nature contains gods of many types, and the physical world is created by these gods. Students may not have strong objections to either worldview but are faced with a logical dilemma: Is the world natural and of natural causes, or is it supernatural? Starting with two of the most familiar worldviews in a Japanese context, students must examine their own beliefs about the nature of reality.

Alongside this growing self-reflection, students gain exposure to a broader spectrum of global perspectives. Religions (Buddhism, Christianity) are also paired with philosophies (structuralism/poststructuralism) as well as governmental and social systems (socialism/communism, *laïcité* secularism in France) for students to consider and compare. Though not designed to be an exhaustive study of religions and worldviews, students are able to see a cross-section of differing worldviews, gaining intercultural awareness. Reactions and support for their opinions on differing worldviews can be expressed, but, more importantly, they may arrive at a conclusion of why they may hold those opinions. When considering France's form of secularism, many students disapproved of keeping religion separate from public life. The ensuing discussion revealed that students valued freedom and the protection of religion, perhaps influenced by the U.S.-shaped Japanese constitution and the absence of France's complicated history of church and state. At the same time, students practiced perspective-taking, empathizing with Muslims whose public expressions of faith are regulated, an indicator of Barrett's (2011) IC outcomes.

Lastly, RW content is applicable to every field of study. This course was taught to students from three departments: Law, Literature, and Commerce. As an English for Specific Purposes

offering, the application was different for each department, and students were tasked with finding their own applications. Law students considered how worldviews and beliefs shape laws. Current laws can be easily accepted as “correct” or taken for granted, but tracing the origin of the law always leads to beliefs and assumptions of the lawmakers. Students were challenged to reflect on Japanese laws that are based on Christian standards despite Christianity’s minority status in Japan: monogamy, free marriage choice, and equality of the sexes. They examined how these ideas are now accepted although they conflict with traditional laws and practices. The third worldview question of morality was especially pertinent for law students. If laws define right and wrong for society, what worldviews most influenced those laws?

Some Literature students have a natural overlap with RW content, as they have taken history, culture, and philosophy courses. A worldview-centered ESP course helps to add further depth to their cultural studies, having them ponder where they situate themselves as a learner and disseminator of belief systems. Commerce students weighed the manifold applications of worldviews: What worldviews do my domestic and international customers have? How do those beliefs affect their buying and selling habits? How does my worldview shape my beliefs about business ethics? What worldviews influenced the economic theory I am learning, and do I agree or disagree with it? Although the topics of worldview are broad, students from every field can find specific applications for their studies and careers, and this was a point of emphasis in this course.

2.3 Course Structure and Pedagogy

This study covers three courses with the same content that was modified to fit B2-level students from the Law, Literature, and Commerce departments. Class sizes ranged from 22 to 26 students and met once a week. Each weekly session required a reading related to worldviews (Appendices 1 and 2), with participants organized into reading circles as a way to promote learner autonomy (Han, 2022). Within these groups, individuals assumed specific roles, including Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Word Master, Researcher, and Culture Connector (Appendix 3). Random group assignment ensured each role was represented when possible. The first 40 to 45 minutes were dedicated to student-led sharing and discussion, after which the class reconvened as a whole. Then the instructor could answer any unanswered questions from the reading circle time, and facilitate class, group, and pair work activities to understand the reading. If time was available, students had a short writing reflection activity, or it would be assigned as homework for a future class.

The theme of the course was understanding worldviews. The readings and content proved a challenge to compile, as the material covered a wide range of world and local religions, philosophies, styles of government, and Japanese sociological studies. While some texts could be used directly from different sources, sometimes the material was too advanced for students' level. Some of these original readings were adapted using OpenAI's (2025) ChatGPT to reduce linguistic complexity (Crossley & McNamara, 2012) and improve accessibility for the students of this course. ChatGPT was prompted to personalize (Huynh & McNamara, 2025) the text to TOEIC 650–700 level students. The instructor reviewed all AI-generated adaptations and manually revised them to ensure accuracy, retention of key worldview concepts, and appropriateness for course objectives. As a part of the material creation methodology (Weaver, 2026), AI was used as an assistive text-adaptation tool rather than as an independent content creator. Students' weekly reading circle assignments were assessed, along with written reflections for homework. Test grades included short quizzes about the readings, a combination of a prepared essay with an in-class presentation summarizing their paper, and in-class written essay exams. Part of the first semester final essay exam included a question asking for student feedback and suggestions of future topics, which were incorporated into the second semester readings as a way to better target student interest and increase engagement (Murphey, 1998).

3. Observations and Discussion

3.1 Perceived Positive Outcomes

From observing and learning through the first year of this ESP course, there were parts of the curriculum that aided intercultural competence, and there were areas that needed improvement. Firstly, the student-led dynamic of the reading circles assisted communication and understanding of challenging new topics. The first part of the class consists of students sharing a role they prepared for the discussion. Students are also charged with leading this and asking discussion questions. This seemed to help create a cooperative learning environment. When students were confused about the reading, others who understood offered an explanation. Discussion questions were made by and for students, so they thought of their own applications. These questions often overlapped with the issues highlighted by the instructor in class activities and discussion following the reading circles.

The reading circles also created an English-language environment to wrestle with new ideas and find language for self-expression. On several occasions, students struggled to articu-

late their answers, frequently remarking, “I have never thought or talked about this idea even in my first language.” There were simultaneous challenges of grasping and comparing new ideas and summarizing them in a second language. In reading circles, all members faced these obstacles together, so there was a supportive environment and a motivation to understand others and be understood.

In even precursory discussions of beliefs or in writing assignments, some students were uninformed of other worldviews or relied on stereotypes. This was most apparent in views of non-Shinto religions and their followers. Several times religious people were seen as blindly hoping or praying to God but not relying on science or practical solutions. Others expressed that religions are man-made ways of controlling people or have a profit motive. This is a far cry from the way many nominal or devout adherents to religions live in modern times. Sometimes future reading assignments were able to challenge these viewpoints. Science as an authoritative system that “proves” truth is problematized when the reading examines that many theories are also built on assumptions or faith, and many foundational scientists believed in the divine (e.g., Newton, Kepler, Galileo). Other readings that challenged these stereotypes included a discussion on the Christian origin of human rights.

Students showed considerable awareness of worldviews in the second semester midterm assessment. The assignment was an essay accompanied by a short presentation summarizing their writing. Students selected a song in any language to analyze through the lens of worldviews. By supporting their evaluation with specific lyrics, they successfully mapped course concepts onto these contemporary cultural artifacts. The resulting essays revealed that musical artists often express a patchwork of competing ideologies simultaneously; for instance, several analyses highlighted how “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga (2011) blends Christian themes of divine design with postmodern views of identity. This assignment offered a measurement of student understanding of worldviews, a synthesis of information from different readings, and critical thinking of cultural products that were student-chosen.

The final exam in the course pulls together the content of the year and requires students to reflect on their own beliefs. Students were to answer the four major worldview questions for themselves and give supporting reasons and explanations. A fifth section, however, was a question of reflection as to whether their worldview was consistent or inconsistent and why. In preparation for this question, towards the end of the course, students had several activities in class where they had to compare different answers for the origin, purpose, morality, and destiny of life. If life’s origin is randomly assembled and evolved life without supernatural cause, the purpose of life cannot be to strive for a better supernatural afterlife. In the final

essay, students had to critique or justify their worldviews for logical consistency. Here they could identify where they had syncretized elements of different worldviews or conversely show that they had adopted a consistent view.

While having students ultimately reflect on their own comprehensive worldview would be a fitting final culmination of the course in any context, students in a Japanese university could become aware of the implications of *iitokodori*: “adopting the good points.” In the first semester, students examine how Japanese culture accommodated Buddhism into a Shinto environment and was adept at borrowing Western systems and new ideas. In the second semester, this idea is later revisited in another reading: Does *iitokodori* work as a worldview? (Appendix 2). The benefit is that it is flexible if one believes in a postmodern approach to truth. The downside is that it contains logical contradictions of competing truth claims and offers no clear standard of how to evaluate moral conundrums. Final essay summaries provided a mixture of results, with some students acknowledging inconsistencies and others seeing their worldview as consistent. It is unclear whether students’ original thinking before the course was challenged or strengthened, and that would be a course of inquiry beyond the scope of this review, but students had the opportunity to defend or critique their ideas and demonstrate their grasp of the course content.

3.2 Challenges

Reflecting on the effectiveness of the worldviews course in developing intercultural competence, questions and areas of needed improvement remain. Although students could be introduced to the meta-conversation on worldviews behind everyday thinking and choices, it is unclear if they were challenged to think outside their worldview as one from a different culture with different assumptions. Introducing concepts that are connected to religions or philosophies is important for awareness, but the application of this information to interact with and understand other cultures is essential. This is perhaps the limitation of any intercultural competence course offered in a somewhat monocultural context such as Japan. Students are even introduced to the idea of Sugimoto’s (2020) friendly authoritarianism, a way in which Japanese culture regulates behavior and social interaction towards conformity. Awareness of this dynamic may just be a first step, but unmasking the deep ways this has affected student worldviews is a longer process.

3.3 Future Considerations

It could be beneficial for students to have more interaction with differing worldviews, but

as this diverse dialogue is difficult to provide in this context, the content could be enhanced to include firsthand accounts or opinion essays of people representing some of the worldviews studied. Students might then have more chances to make empathic inferences (Ickes, 1997) or role plays to think from a different point of view. In the current setup of reading circles, there is an opportunity for different viewpoints, but this may be limited by effects of conformity or the pressure to conform. Another difficulty is striking a balance between processing and demonstrating understanding of new knowledge with the application of worldviews for specific purposes. As outlined before, worldviews cover every area of study and profession, but the topics can be overarching and theoretical. In discussion time and in essay assignments, students are asked how they will apply what they have learned. A more focused project or assignment might require students to find their own application to their field, where they would have to exhibit practical implementation of their beliefs and knowledge of others' beliefs. This might require the instructor to provide examples of such applications or approval of student proposals.

4. Conclusion

A content-based course on worldviews could be one step towards bridging the gap between mandated language learning goals and the promotion of intercultural competence. It allows students to work within English reading and writing requirements but introduces concepts at the core of personal, cultural, and intercultural ways of being and believing.

Students must draw on their existing language skills and knowledge while adding new concepts and ways of explaining them. More importantly, a worldviews course asks students to not take their point of view for granted or as a universal standard. The course allows students to see themselves as one member of a world of differing viewpoints and to identify sources and influences of shared and differing ideas. They are given the opportunity to go beyond expressing their opinion to understanding why and how they may have come to their conclusions. Ultimately, the initiative to develop intercultural competence in ELT lies with instructors and their curriculum choices, teaching across academic departments in largely required courses. Teaching worldviews as content is one way to target IC development, and it is anticipated that instructors will find others. Worldviews shape how people understand reality, but language learning and intercultural competence make genuine understanding between those worldviews possible.

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[Appendix 1] ESP Weekly Readings and Course Schedule

1st Semester

- Week 1 Course Introductions and beginning activities: What is a worldview?
- Week 2 Naturalism
- Week 3 Shinto and Non-religion in Japan
- Week 4 Buddhism
- Week 5 *Itokodori*/Mini test 1
- Week 6 Christianity: Human Origins
- Week 7 Christianity: Fall and Redemption
- Week 8 Christianity: Upside Down Thinking
- Week 9 Midterm Essay and Presentation
- Week 10 Human Rights
- Week 11 *Laïcité*: Secularism in France
- Week 12 Faith in Science
- Week 13 Two Paths to Identity: Individualism and Traditional Cultures/Mini test 2
- Week 14 Meaning and Purpose from Different Worldviews
- Week 15 Final In-class Essay

[Appendix 2] ESP Weekly Readings and Course Schedule

2nd Semester

- Week 1 Worldviews in review and activities
- Week 2 Structuralism and Post-structuralism
- Week 3 Social Darwinism and Eugenics
- Week 4 Socialism and Communism
- Week 5 What Causes War?/Mini test 1
- Week 6 Shifting Views of Gender
- Week 7 Marriage and Sexuality
- Week 8 Midterm Essay and Presentation
- Week 9 Morality in Different Worldviews
- Week 10 Materialism
- Week 11 What happens after death? Views of the afterlife/Mini test 2
- Week 12 Friendly Authoritarianism in Japan
- Week 13 Does *Itokodori* work?
- Week 14 Final In-class essay

[Appendix 3] Weekly Reading Circle Roles

Have each member choose one task to prepare for the next class. Take turns sharing and discussing your task. Allow about 5 minutes to present to the group and 5 minutes for questions and discussion from others.

Discussion Leader

Prepare 5 discussion questions relating to the text. The questions should help your group to think about the themes, ideas and issues in a deeper way. You are in charge of making sure each person talks and the discussion keeps going.

Summarizer

Write a 200 word summary of the reading. Be sure to include the main ideas and topics the author wrote about. You should not copy the words from the text but put the meaning in your own words to make it understandable for you and the other students.

Word Master

Choose 10 words or phrases from the text. Give 1) a definition 2) any background you can find on the word and 3) another example sentence or idiom that will help students see how the word can be used. Discuss with your group the words and definitions you found.

Researcher

Choose a topic from the reading and research it further. It could be historical background, recent news, statistics or even biographical information about the author. Write a 200 word summary of your findings and share them with your group.

Culture Connector

Think of a theme or topic from the reading and how it connects to your own experience or others' experiences. Write a 200 word paragraph describing a connection that relates to the reading. It can be a story from your life, your thoughts or reactions to a trend in society, or observations from everyday life.

