

Academic Reading and Writing in Stream Four: A Multi-Pronged Proposal for Change

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The purpose of this paper is to disseminate information to all ELA staff about a multi-pronged proposal for suggested changes to the ARW course for Stream Four, the stream in which students with TOEFL scores of 350-450 are placed. The proposal is primarily curricular in nature and scope, and involves considering significant changes to the current in-house materials: *The ELA Reader* and *The Student Guide to Writing in the ELA*. In addition, we propose reformulating the learning outcomes and indicators guiding the curriculum so that they follow The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and developing lesson plans based on a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to accompany the piloted reading and writing materials. Making course content available to students online is also discussed. Finally, student assessment will be looked at, followed by a proposal to develop tools for evaluating the efficacy of the piloted materials and the other changes that are being proposed.

In 2012, the English Language Program (ELP) at ICU underwent a reform. One of the main outcomes of the reform was to create space for a fourth level, Stream Four, in order to give more time and language support to students who enter ICU with a TOEFL score below 450. In addition to the creation of a fourth stream for students who can benefit from more support in English, another recommendation of the 2012 reform was to create “separate program curriculum content for each level” in order to better meet the needs of students registered in the four levels (from the AY 2009 Faculty retreat presentation on ELP reforms). However, at a later date, the ELP Reform Committee (a university-level committee reviewing and making final adjustments to reform procedures and policies), decided that the ELP should maintain common topics and at least one shared reading for each of these topics across all program streams (ELP Reform Committee minutes for Nov. 16, 2010). A proposal for these common topics and readings was made, agreed upon, and published in the ELA Staff Handbook of 2012. This stipulation was made because of the desire to maintain a unifying thread through the ELA, thereby providing all students, irrespective of level, with a common or shared experience as they moved through the program. This ideal of a common core program has long been held by various members of staff at ICU. However, it is sometimes seen as problematic by those teaching in Stream Four. Before looking at this proposal for change, a brief review of the notion of the common core, and why it might not be appropriate for Stream Four in the way it is currently delivered, will be discussed.

ICU's Heritage, the Common Core, and Stream Four

During the reform process, our former colleague, Chris Hale, traced the origins of ICU's liberal arts heritage in a paper written for *The Language Research Bulletin*. Hale illustrates how ICU was directly modeled on the liberal arts education at Harvard, Yale, and Columbia. Similar to these Ivy League institutions, ICU is also often involved in debate about the curriculum, but Hale concludes that one thing is clear: the training ELA students receive "should remain consistent with the key functions of the ELP within a liberal arts framework: providing common, core content, taught to all programs *synchronously*, designed to enhance critical thought and analysis" (Hale, 2010, p. 10).

The first point we would like to make is that while it is true that Columbia University, for example, has a common core program and it is also true, as Hale notes in his paper, that some of our incoming freshmen students do have TOEFL scores that would enable them to study at English-medium universities such as Columbia (Hale, p. 10), the issue that is not addressed here is that Stream Four students do not have such TOEFL test results. Their scores are between 150-250 points lower than what is required of students who want to participate fully in the rigorous liberal arts programs at Columbia, Harvard, or Yale. The Reading, Writing, and Speaking descriptors of a student with a CEFR level of B1 (equal to TOEFL 350-450) can be found in the appendices. These descriptors provide an accurate summary of the language abilities of Stream Four students when they enter the program, and give us a clearer picture of what our students can do when they start at the university.

The second point to be made is connected to the first: that the price of honoring our liberal arts heritage by adhering to a common core may in fact be negatively affecting Stream Four students' reading development, critical thinking, and ability to participate in small group discussion. In fact, teachers who advocate a common core may inadvertently be pushing the focus of the program onto language by maintaining that all students should read from a set of core readings. Based on recurring comments and concerns voiced at Stream Four meetings, the majority of teachers in the past two years have noticed that students tend to cope with the heavy cognitive load placed on them by the texts by resorting to translating chunks of text, or accessing translations online. Despite the instructors' best efforts to develop extensive materials to supplement the texts (focusing on both language and content), and their attempts to facilitate a liberal arts classroom atmosphere wherein students critically discuss salient parts of the text in small groups, they found two significant challenges: one, students still struggle with language and content despite the extensive scaffolding; and two, students find it difficult to critically discuss the themes found in the text in an effective and fulfilling manner due to a lower level of English proficiency that is not being directly acknowledged in class. In fact, many Stream Four teachers have found that the majority of class "discussions" have been reduced to a deciphering of the text, rather than a critical analysis of its themes.

This is not to argue that some kind of common core is not appropriate in the ICU context. Probably, most people on staff would be committed to developing a common core that forms the backbone of a liberal arts education. However, the question here is whether or not the common core should mean common readings. Perhaps the common core could refer to a common set of principles, themes, and goals that could be reached with different materials in different streams. It is reasonable to argue that in our context, a student with a TOEFL score of 350-450 does not have the same experience reading a text in English as a student with a TOEFL score of 600-620. It is also reasonable to argue that it is not pedagogically sound to require Stream Four students to read material 150-250 points above their level when they begin their first term in the ELA.

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However, having a common core is not the only thing we need to look at when considering curricular change. If we are committed to teaching in the spirit of the liberal arts, we also need to think about the extent to which our materials are updated and reflective of current issues in the various disciplines. Currently, they are in need of revision, as will be shown below. We also need to consider presenting students with materials that reflect a greater variety of perspectives. In terms of writing skills, we may need to re-consider the heavy emphasis we have put on argumentation, which favors preparation for the Humanities, but marginalizes the Social and Natural Sciences to some degree. Further, we need to think about standardizing how we articulate our learning objectives, perhaps by using a tool such as CEFR descriptors. Teachers are also considering how to best address the language needs of Stream Four students within our liberal arts context. One way to do this could be the adoption of a CLIL approach. We would also like to encourage modernizing the way we deliver materials to students (online reading options) and standardizing how we assess them. Finally, we need to consider ways in which we can continually assess not only the top-down directives of the ELA, but also the bottom-up proposals, such as this one. If we aspire to create the best program possible, we must be vigilant about assessing ourselves, and revising what and how we teach.

Proposed Changes to a Core Course of Stream Four

The changes in this proposal were not prescribed by any staff member in particular. Instead, they arose organically out of Stream Four teachers' feedback during the past two years, as well as out of the experiences of the first two authors in their capacity as Stream Four Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) coordinators. The proposal made to the ELA Management Committee in November, 2015, the contents of which can be found below, was a joint effort of Stream Four teachers of this core course.

Changes to In-House Materials

Changes to The ELA Reader. *The ELA Reader* contains a selection of readings chosen by ELP/ELA teachers. The readings in this in-house textbook cover various topics including Education, Perception, Race, Culture, Bioethics, and The Future. The texts were written by specialists, primarily professors working at English-medium universities in the West. This year, several new readings were piloted in Stream Four. While the same themes are being explored each term as in the past, several key changes are being proposed.

The first change is grading the readings to a level appropriate for the students. The purpose of this grading is to better enable students in ARW to participate in critical discussion of the texts. When the cognitive load is placed on the deciphering of the text, students are less capable of focusing on analysis. The readings were graded at the B1 level in Spring, the B2 level in Fall, and the C1 level in Winter. Data collected after the Spring and Fall Terms, when seven new readings were piloted, indicate that students feel the graded readings are more suited to their level.

The second change involves broadening the text types we introduce to the students. While the Spring Term readings are examples of texts usually found in the Humanities and focus on Educational Values and Argumentation, the Fall Term readings piloted this academic year break out of this mould and provide students with examples of texts/research methodologies typically found in the Social Sciences, including literature reviews, surveys,

interviews, and psychological experiments that focus on the common core themes of Race and Culture. In Winter Term, we are piloting articles that focus more on Natural Sciences. The first common core theme continues to be Bioethics, but the focus is less on the philosophical and more on the scientific. The second theme, The Future, introduces students somewhat more deeply to texts in the Natural Sciences that prompt us to look towards the future, and address issues such as climate change and interstellar travel. While the articles are not prime examples of texts students would encounter in the Natural Sciences (this is because most teachers are not qualified to teach such material), they come closer to the goal of including more Natural Science themed work in our reading material. In general, the hope is that the wider variety of text genres will better prepare students for their future study in the College of Liberal Arts.

The third key change focuses on currency. The core readings for the Spring Term have not been updated since 1989. In fact, many of the articles in *The ELA Reader* are relatively old with respect to the issues they are addressing, and approximately half of them have been used for 20 years or more. The piloted readings are more up-to-date in terms of content, and also address more current issues. In order to assess whether there is a notable improvement in Stream Four student performance and feedback, we would like to propose that this pilot reading project be continued in the coming academic year.

Changes to The Student Guide to Writing in the ELA. *The Student Guide to Writing in the ELA (SGW)* is the in-house writing textbook created and maintained by staff over the years. In addition, we also use *The Little Brown Compact Handbook*. The latter is an excellent resource for novice academic writers, geared towards native or near-native speakers. While it was quite possible to use with Stream Four students, again, a good deal of support and scaffolding is required to make the language in the text accessible to them. Since we are no longer using this text, it will probably be necessary to adapt some key information from the book that Stream Four teachers feel is essential, and incorporate it into *SGW*. This would primarily be information about critical thinking, writing for an academic audience, and citation of sources.

In addition, as mentioned previously, we would like to explore moving away from the heavy emphasis on argumentation in reading and writing, a common method of inquiry in the Humanities, and introduce students to other genres, including problem/solution and expository writing. In order to take Stream Four in this direction, it may be necessary to update or make additions to the *SGW*.

Finally, some Stream Four teachers have discussed the need to clarify the difference between the documented essay and the research paper, in order to form a more consistent approach to the teaching of writing as students move through the freshman and sophomore components of the ELA program.

Changes to Articulating Learning Objectives

Currently, learning objectives for this core reading and writing course are listed in the form of “learning outcomes” and “learning outcome indicators” in the *ELA Staff Handbook*. While this is helpful, exploring the possibility of developing CEFR-J level descriptors for the stream is proposed for two reasons. First, several Japanese universities have recently adopted the CEFR-J as a guide to help identify and monitor the language proficiency and progress of their students, and a significant amount of local research has demonstrated that the

implementation of CEFR-J-based “can do” statements has promoted positive change in tertiary-level English language programs throughout Japan (Collette & Sullivan, 2010; O’Dwyer, 2010; Sato, 2010). Second, the use of CEFR-J-based “can do” checklists has also been shown to be effective in fostering learner autonomy and self-regulation (Nagai & O’Dwyer, 2011). In order to increase student awareness of this standardized tool, it is proposed that students be introduced to the CEFR levels, and be informed that their TOEFL scores correspond with a CEFR level of B1. In addition, it is proposed that students be supported through the course in the hopes that they will achieve a level of a solid B2 to C1 by the end of the Stream Four program. This can be checked by examining their progress with their IELTS scores as they leave the ELA.

Changes to Lesson Materials and the Implementation of a CLIL Approach

As Stream Four strives to emphasize both English language education and content while fostering a liberal arts approach to learning, it is proposed that the CLIL-based materials bank we are currently working on to supplement the newly piloted readings be further developed. Specifically, lesson plans are being designed with appropriate scaffolding, including pre-reading activities, activation of prior knowledge, and vocabulary work (Dale, van der Es, & Tanner, 2011; Meyer, 2010). In addition, critical thinking tips, advice, and examples are being included in each lesson plan to help Stream Four students with one of the more challenging aspects of the program. These lessons are meant to serve as a model for students as to the strategies they might employ in order to read a text independently, as well to the questions they should be asking themselves to develop their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, as most ELA teachers are employed on short-term contracts and may be assigned to a variety of streams during this time, these lesson plans will be useful to help orient new teachers to the stream, and provide them with an idea of what other teachers are doing in their classes. Ideally, these materials will be used as a springboard for new teachers, who can then adjust them to suit their teaching style and the needs and interests of their students, if they wish.

Changes to Access of Materials

This academic year, two of the Stream Four teachers have been experimenting with providing online access to readings and lesson plans. Online materials not only save paper and printing costs, but also enable a number of reading options, such as links to supplementary articles, films, and visual aids. A variety of language learning support materials, such as online dictionaries and links to language learners’ websites, could also be easily provided. Past research has shown that complementing paper-based reading with online reading allows a number of benefits including links to a variety of authentic materials, multi-media capabilities to cater to students with different learning styles, the nonlinear structure of the online text which allows students to develop reading strategies that are specific to online reading, and, simply, the convenience of being able to access the text anytime, any place (Brandl, 2002; Chun & Plass, 2000). It is proposed that we develop our online materials and collect data from students about their reading preferences in AY 2016, so that we can continue to improve online access options.

Changes in the Approach to Assessment: Exams and Essays

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In the past, Stream Four students had one examination per trimester. They knew what would be asked of them and they could prepare their answers in advance. This year, we have experimented with having both a midterm exam as well as a final. In addition, we have not provided the students with the questions in advance. This is to simulate one of the test writing experiences students may have in the future, either in the College of Liberal Arts or during study abroad. It is proposed that we continue with this format next year as most teachers in Stream Four felt it was more appropriate than giving students the questions in advance and, in their end-of-course feedback, students indicated that having two exams helped them focus their thoughts more concisely on the material read in class, and also helped them prepare to write their research papers.

It is further proposed that teachers develop a common rubric for grading essays. This proposal comes in response to students who notice that grading practices change from term to term, depending on the teacher. While some differences are to be expected, it is proposed that Stream Four teachers develop a clear rubric for grading essays so that the assessment policies are transparent for teachers and students alike. As has been shown in previous research, the use of a rubric does not only increase the reliability of scoring but also has the potential to promote student learning and ameliorate writing instruction (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

A Call for Pilot Project Evaluation

Given that the Stream Four pilot project is in its early stages, it is proposed that a method for evaluation of this program be devised over the coming academic year. As all streams are currently piloting new materials and proposing changes to the curriculum, many of the methods of program evaluation, and the direction of curriculum renewal, will come from the Director of the ELA. However, the teachers who are in direct contact with the students and who are piloting the new materials also need to have their voices heard when it comes to evaluating what they are doing, and how they feel it is working for them and for their students. It is, therefore, proposed that in addition to having top-down directives about program renewal, we should also have organic, bottom-up methods of collecting information from teachers about the materials they are using, and what they and their students have to say about the effectiveness of the materials used in class. It is hoped that a tentative method of program evaluation be outlined in the coming academic year.

Conclusion

While there have been numerous changes implemented top-down by various committees charged with the task of restructuring the ELP/ELA at ICU, bottom-up changes in curriculum and teaching materials have been less of a priority. The authors believe that Stream Four students would benefit from additional changes that would more effectively and realistically address their unique needs. Suggestions include creating separate ELA reading materials for Stream Four, further tailoring *The Student Guide to Writing in the ELA* to these students' needs, and incorporating CEFR-J styled statements into the articulation of Stream Four learning objectives. In addition, we propose further developing our materials bank and creating lesson plans based on a CLIL approach, and making the readings as well as the lesson materials available to students online for the duration of the term. We further suggest developing our assessment practices by creating up-to-date rubrics for the grading of writing

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assignments. Lastly, we propose the development of a Stream Four pilot program evaluation plan in order to assess the effectiveness of the piloted changes.

Finally, the pedagogical principles informing this course need to be revised in such a way that the unity of the program and its reputation for challenging its students would not be compromised by this proposal, but rather have a greater chance of being realized by all students. We hope that this paper will serve as an impetus to enable ELA teachers to initiate much-needed constructive dialogue so that we can move forward to best serve our students and the program.

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Appendix A: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, p. 26-27.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment

Table 2. *Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid*

		A1	A2	B1
U N D E R S T A N D I N G	Listening	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.
	Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.
S P E A K I N G	Spoken Interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
	Spoken Production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.
W R I T I N G	Writing	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.

Common Reference Levels

B2	C1	C2
I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.