

# *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Rain Man*: an English Comprehension Course

Anthony Mills

## Introduction

This paper introduces and provides a rationale for a thirteen-week English language course that the author has been teaching at the University of Tokyo (Komaba) since 2007 (five years ago.) The course runs in the first semester of the university's academic year (April – July.) The official name of the course is English II (C), with the 'C' standing for 'comprehension.' The course aims to improve the ability of students to understand both spoken and written English. Course content, most grading criteria and other aspects of the practical conduct of the course are decided by the individual teachers of each class. In total, there are around 90 English II (C) class groups each year at Komaba, and most teachers are in charge of one, two or three classes each. This paper focuses on two classes that were taught in April-July 2011.

The students who take the course are at the beginning of the second year of their undergraduate degree and they are following an integrated liberal arts program (the 'junior' or '*zenki*' program) before proceeding to their subject specializations in their third and fourth years (the 'senior' or '*koki*' program.) During their first two years, students are divided into six broad groups depending on their proposed subsequent major course of study (but the majors themselves have not yet been finalized.) There are three groups of students who eventually hope to study within the social sciences or the humanities, while the other three groups are for students who want to go on to follow courses in the natural sciences in the *koki* division. As a result of these loose groupings, in any one of the English II classes, there is normally a mix of students. However, most of the class members will usually be interested in and know quite a lot about one general subject area. Students must take English II classes in three different skill areas: Presentation (P), Reading (R) and Comprehension (C). Most students take the Reading (R) and Presentation (P) courses in the first and second semesters of their freshman year and the Comprehension (C) course in the first semester of their sophomore year. In addition to these three one-semester English II courses, students in the junior (*zenki*) program also take an English I course, which focuses on reading and

listening skills and is based on a textbook and video series that is published by the University of Tokyo. There are also elective '*Kokusai Communication*' English courses in reading, speaking and listening and writing available for students who wish to take them.

At present, students are not divided according to English language ability in either English I or English II (although English I will begin a streaming procedure from the summer semester of 2013.) However, all students have passed the University of Tokyo English entrance exam in the year before the English II (C) course runs. Most of them would be placed by private Japanese English language schools in classes at lower to upper intermediate levels.<sup>i</sup>

Generally speaking, students are highly motivated and most demonstrate both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for taking English language learning seriously. Not only is it necessary for most of them to achieve a high level of English in their chosen academic fields in order to succeed in their future work and studies, they are also mostly interested in the subject itself for integrative reasons.

English II (C) classes meet once a week for ninety minutes each time and class size ranges from 28 to around 40 students.

This paper first introduces the rationale behind the organization and content of the course as it is taught by this author. It goes on to describe practical issues related to course administration and outlines the course in detail. Finally, it reports student reaction to the course and discusses plans for improvement and development, and ways in which courses such as this with varying content might be developed for different teaching situations and different groups of students in the future.

## **Rationale and Background**

Language teaching methodologies become popular or fashionable and then their popularity wanes in different historical periods and in different geographical areas. In Japan, Chinese was the first foreign language that it was necessary for people to learn. However, it was not the spoken form of the language that was needed but the written form. Hino<sup>ii</sup> asserts that Japanese people needed to be able to read texts written in Chinese in order to understand ideas, concepts and methods that were imported from China. As a result of this situation, learning a foreign language came to mean the same thing as being able to understand the written form of the language and render it in Japanese. The ability to understand and translate in this way and the process that the 'reader' engaged in came to be known as *yakudoku* or 'translation/reading.' *Yakudoku* is

often referred to as 'grammar translation' in English.

Subsequently, this language learning and teaching methodology based on translation skills came to be applied to other languages that Japanese people needed to learn (for example German and Dutch), and eventually it was used for the study of English. Thus, the traditional *yakudoku* method was still applied, even though the use to which the target language would be put was often different. Although there have been many attempts to introduce change, the *yakudoku* method has remained popular, and there are many English teachers in Japan who still use it. Porcaro (2004) points out<sup>iii</sup> that research by Gorsuch<sup>iv</sup> and Takeda<sup>v</sup> indicates that it is even now used by up to 80% of Japanese teachers of English.

Needless to say, however, language teaching has moved on since the days when *yakudoku* was the only teaching method used in Japan. Fujimoto-Adamson<sup>vi</sup> points out that, since the start of the innovations and changes of the Meiji era in 1868, the English language has been through regular peaks and troughs of popularity and there have been associated changes in the interest shown in the methodology that has been used to teach the language. After the Second World War, for example, teachers from America were responsible for introducing the audiolingual method, which focused on the repetition of recorded model sentences and drills in order to encourage the acquisition of spoken language skills. The method that is currently used by the Berlitz chain of language schools currently uses a version of this method.

Since the 1980s, the so-called 'communicative approach' to language teaching has probably been the most popular single method used by trained foreign teachers of English in Japan. Using this method, teachers try to replicate genuine communicative tasks in the language classroom, so that students are encouraged to use the language that they are studying for a real communicative purpose. However, more recently there has been a move to blend methodologies and approaches according to the classroom situation and in order to achieve variety and the best possible results. One of the more popular innovations of the last ten years or so has been the introduction of more 'content-based' language teaching material.<sup>vii</sup> In this variety of language learning, students improve their linguistic skills in the target language by focusing on a particular topic or theme, performing related linguistic tasks, and studying associated vocabulary and relevant language structures. As a result of using the target language in this way (in order to perform specific, objective tasks related to a particular subject area and using the associated vocabulary,) it is claimed that there is an improvement in students' ability to use the target language successfully. In Europe, content-based

language learning is known as 'content and language integrated learning' and referred to with the abbreviation CLIL. It is very popular and has a long history of acceptance. As long ago as 1995, the European Commission published a White Paper on CLIL that forms part of European Union policy on multilingualism.<sup>viii</sup> The course of study that is described in this paper is an example of this kind of methodology.

### Choice of Theme and Content

As was explained briefly above, students at the University of Tokyo on the *zenki* program are divided into six broad groups, with three groups aiming to go on to study in the humanities and social sciences and the other three focusing on the natural sciences. It was decided in the English II (C) courses under discussion to focus on a thematic content area that would potentially be of interest to students from various academic disciplines (social studies, science, arts and languages.) The thematic area that was eventually chosen was autism, and in particular the condition known as Asperger Syndrome or Asperger's Syndrome (AS). AS is a behavioural disorder. It is associated in particular with young males. According to the National Autistic Society website, "Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism, which is a lifelong disability that affects how a person makes sense of the world, processes information and relates to other people. Autism is often described as a 'spectrum disorder' because the condition affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees."<sup>ix</sup>

Asperger Syndrome is mostly a 'hidden disability', in that it is impossible to tell that someone has the condition from their outward appearance. While there are similarities with autism, people with AS have fewer problems with speaking and are often of average, or above average, intelligence. With the right support and encouragement, people with AS can lead full and independent lives.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest shown in autism, both in the media and academically. This is largely due to the fact that more and more children are being diagnosed as autistic.<sup>x</sup> Not only has there also been an increasing amount of academic research into the topic in general, but also novels, television series and films have increasingly featured characters displaying AS or other autistic characteristics.<sup>xi</sup> It was felt that using content related to this topic for this English course would attract students and stimulate their interest.

The two main artistic works that have been used in the course are the feature film *Rain Man*<sup>xii</sup>, directed by Barry Levinson in 1988 and the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*<sup>xiii</sup>, which was written by Mark Haddon in 2003. Both feature

characters with AS in central roles.

*Rain Man* stars Tom Cruise as the character called Charlie Babbit and Dustin Hoffman as his autistic brother, Raymond. At the beginning of the film, Charlie does not know that he has a brother and it is only when he receives news of the death of his father that he learns that most of his father's considerable estate has been left to the brother he does not know. This makes him very angry. The main part of the film concentrates on the development of the relationship between the two men. It was one of the first fictional portrayals of an autistic character in a film.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is the first-person story of Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy with Asperger's Syndrome, who is trying to solve the mystery of who killed a neighbour's pet dog, but whose investigations lead him to the necessity of unraveling a mystery that influences him personally and deeply.

Both of these works have been praised widely for introducing AS to the general public and for presenting sympathetic characters who are affected by the syndrome. However, both works have also been criticized for simplifying and trivializing AS and for making it seem like a party trick for people with highly developed mathematical abilities who otherwise find it difficult to communicate with other people.

Other materials that are used in the course include a sequence of You Tube video clips about the gifted AS sufferer, Daniel Tammet. The title for these is *The Boy With the Incredible Brain I-V*.<sup>xiv</sup> I have also used a variety of newspaper articles about autism and AS in the course and try to vary these each time I teach it.

### Practical Issues and Course Description

The first week of this thirteen-week course is designated as an 'Introduction Week' and students who are scheduled to take an English II (C) course can visit various classrooms to see which of the classes they want to apply to take. The results are decided by lottery. This procedure means that the membership of class groups is not finalized until the second week of the semester and the core course runs for only 12 weeks.

In the second week of the semester, after they have registered for specific classes, students are introduced to the way the course is to be run and to the grading system that will be used. Students are told that, in the first part of the semester, they will read 30-40 pages of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (CIDN) at home each week and then do related work in the classroom during class time. They are also told that they will write a final paper of approximately 500 words and that they are

expected to complete various short reading and writing assignments at home, as well as read the core text. There is no final test. At this pace, it takes seven weeks for students to finish reading the book and for the majority of students this appears to be a reasonable workload. Student evaluation of the course and of the amount of work that is required outside the classroom indicates that most students spend between one and two hours in preparation time. (See table 1.)<sup>xv</sup>

**Table 1: How much time did you spend each week preparing for or reviewing this class?**

	More than 4 hours	2-4 hours	1-2 hours	Less than 1 hour	Almost none
Group 1	1	7	19	7	2
Group 2	0	8	14	8	3
Total	1	15	33	15	5

Group 1: n=36    Group 2: n=33    Total: n=69

Despite the data presented in Table 1, for many students, the idea of reading a complete novel in English at such a fast pace is at first daunting. In order to introduce the idea in a palatable way and encourage them to accept that the task is possible, students initially listen to an audio recording of the first five chapters of the novel in this introductory class session.<sup>xvi</sup> This activity helps them to realize that reading the book will probably not be quite as much of a challenge as they had imagined.

It should be noted that the narrator of the novel is a fifteen-year-old with AS, and that this is reflected in the language he uses to tell his story. Vocabulary is restricted and mostly non-specialised, and sentence structure is simple and easy-to-understand. This helps readers whose first language is not English to approach the novel with greater confidence. It also gives them a sense of security and helps them to understand what is happening as the novel progresses. However, it does not mean that the content of the book is simplified or trivialised. On the contrary, the issues that are dealt with are challenging and intellectually demanding. This quality in the novel helps readers, especially those who are not native speakers of English, to confront the content with interest and understanding while at the same time giving them a relatively easy linguistic task.

In-class activities during the first weeks of the course, when the students are in the process of reading CIDN at home, include various kinds of interactive pair-work and group-work activities, as well as some short, individual writing assignments. Initially, these are designed primarily to check that students understand the content of the novel and that they are keeping up with the reading at home. At a later stage (after the second or third week,) the difficulty level of the activities is increased and students

are encouraged to discuss the book and their reactions to the topics that are raised in it in as much detail as possible. Activities range from simple question and answer comprehension activities to structured, interactive crosswords, in which students give each other hints and clues to elicit the vocabulary that is introduced in the section of the novel that they have just read at home, to freer, discussion activities in which they discuss the issues that are raised in small groups. There are opportunities for students to practice short written activities in class for both accuracy and fluency and they are also asked to write two or three short reaction papers at home about issues that are raised in the text and in their discussion work. Two sample worksheets (for the first week and the third week of classes) are presented in the appendix of this paper. Initially, the activities in the worksheets are fairly simple and deal mostly with factual comprehension issues (see worksheet 1.) However, in later weeks students are asked to consider and discuss more complex questions that are raised by the novel. These issues include the care of disabled people in society, the nature of intelligence and the human need for stability, and the ways that these issues are addressed in the text.

In the seventh week, the movie *Rain Man* is introduced, along with associated discussion and other language activities. Most of the time in class for the next three weeks, however, is spent watching the movie, which is 133 minutes long. For viewing purposes, the film is divided into three roughly equal sections of about forty-five minutes each and it is viewed in English with English subtitles.

The introduction of *Rain Man* and, subsequently, *The Boy with the Incredible Brain*, the sequence of short video clips about the well-known British AS sufferer, Daniel Temmet, allows the classes to further develop their knowledge of AS. Individual students begin to express strong opinions on various topics that are raised in the texts that we have watched and read, and as a result of their in-class discussions and, in many cases, because of individual research that they choose to do outside of class.

In around the ninth week of the course, the topic for the final essay is introduced. For the past two years, the default topic has been 'How Should Asperger's Syndrome be Treated?' This topic has proven to be stimulating and students have written thought-provoking, well-researched and successful essays. If, however, a student has another topic that he or she would like to write about, the essay topic can be personalized and altered (in consultation with the teacher.) Some students have chosen to write about personal experiences that they have had with AS through family, friends or volunteer work. Others choose to focus on a particular aspect of AS that they find particularly relevant or interesting.

## Student Evaluation of the Course

As part of the standard course evaluation, students are also asked to specify the degree of interest they feel in the course, their satisfaction with the range of issues that are covered in classes, their judgment of the difficulty level of the course, the degree to which the course helps them to gain new knowledge or skills and their overall satisfaction. The data from the questionnaires that were distributed in July 2011 are given in the following tables:

**Table 2: How much interest did you feel in this course?**

	A great deal	A reasonable amount	Not very much
Group 1	17	17	2
Group 2	9	20	4
Total	26	37	6

Group 1: n=36    Group 2: n=33    Total: n=69

Overall, interest levels were high, which indicates that the theme that was chosen for the course content was appropriate and reasonable. It is difficult to choose a theme for a content-based course that is going to appeal to a wide range of students with varying academic interests and that is going to remain interesting and motivating. However, it seems that the Aspergers' Syndrome theme was correctly judged to be suitable for these groups of students. However, in other teaching situations, different thematic areas would be appropriate and teachers should naturally be aware of this issue when developing courses. It is also important to remember that course content should remain intellectually stimulating even if the level of linguistic difficulty is necessarily limited.

**Table 3: The range of issues covered in this course was...**

	Appropriate	A little too much	A little insufficient	Too much	Insufficient
Group 1	29	4	2	0	1
Group 2	23	8	1	1	0
Total	52	12	3	1	1

Group 1: n=36    Group 2: n=33    Total: n=69

Again, student response to this question was positive overall. The range of issues what was addressed by the course was overwhelmingly perceived to be suitable.



**Table 4: The level of this course was ...**

	Appropriate	A little difficult	A little easy	Too difficult	Too easy
Group 1	26	4	4	1	1
Group 2	21	9	2	1	0
Total	47	13	6	2	1

Group 1: n=36    Group 2: n=33    Total: n=69

The question here is inadequate in that it does not specify what kind of difficulty level should be discussed. It is not clear whether the question is about linguistic (English language) difficulty, or whether it is referring to the other intellectual/cognitive demands of the course, which are also considerable. However, it is interesting that a large majority of the students considered that the course was pitched overall at an 'appropriate' level of difficulty.

**Table 5: Please give on overall evaluation of this course. You are ...**

	Very satisfied	Reasonably satisfied	Average	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied
Group 1	10	17	8	1	0
Group 2	7	18	8	0	0
Total	17	35	16	11	0

Group 1: n=36    Group 2: n=33    Total: n=69

A large majority of students were 'very satisfied' or 'reasonably satisfied' with the course. However, it would be interesting to discover specifically which areas of the course some students were dissatisfied with.

### Concluding Remarks

The course described in this paper has been stimulating and interesting to teach. I have learned a lot from the process of writing it and teaching it. I have learned a lot about Asperger's Syndrome and the way it and those who are touched by it are treated in our societies and in our institutions. I have also learned a lot about my students, what stimulates and interests them and what helps them to learn.

Overall student reaction to the course so far has been positive and it will be valuable to continue developing it and to find new, complementary materials to use in the future. It was fortunate that an appropriate theme for the course was found so easily - a theme that appears to stimulate and excite this group of students and therefore encourages them to involve themselves in the learning procedure willingly and with passion. The students become seriously involved in this topic, in understanding the texts that are studied as part of the course, in researching the issues that are raised and in doing all of this in English.

Unfortunately, none of this means that the course as it stands is automatically transferable to a different teaching situation. However, it would be interesting and productive to develop this research and to investigate what kinds of content and activity are appropriate for different kinds of student with different interests and different English language abilities, studying in a variety of settings.

## Appendix: Sample Worksheets

### A) Worksheet 1

English II (C)

Mills

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

Worksheet 1: Ch. 2 to Ch. 59

Your name in *romaji*: \_\_\_\_\_ Your number: \_\_\_\_\_

You will hand in this worksheet later in today's class.

About how long did you spend reading the first 32 pages of the novel? Write your answer on this line: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Work with a partner. Write 10 questions in English about the content of the first 32 pages of the novel. Ask questions that have clear answers. Do not ask 'opinion' questions. Work together to make the questions. Do not simply write 5 questions each. Both of you should write all of the questions on your own worksheets. Speak in English as much as you can. Try to make your questions interesting - not too easy or too difficult:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_
- f. \_\_\_\_\_
- g. \_\_\_\_\_
- h. \_\_\_\_\_
- i. \_\_\_\_\_
- j. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Sit in groups of three and ask each other the questions you have written. Take turns to ask one question each. Do not show each other your worksheets. Tell me when you finish.
3. Re-group in new groups of three and ask each other your questions again. Tell me when you finish.
4. What do you think of the novel so far? Write your opinion on the back of this page. Write as much as you can. Tell me what is interesting, what is frustrating, what is difficult to understand etc.

## B) Worksheet 3

English II (C)

Mills

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

Worksheet 3: Ch. 103 to Ch. 151

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Your number: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Work in groups of three. Together, write seven questions about chapters 103-151. Work together. Do not divide the work up. Each member of the group should write all of the questions in the spaces below. Write the answers as well. Speak in English as much as possible.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

e. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

f. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

g. \_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Make new groups of three and ask your two new partners your seven questions.

3. Go back to your original seat and work with the people around you (your original group.) Discuss these three questions. For each question, begin by speaking in English and then switch to Japanese when I tell you:

- i) It has been claimed that one important criterion for identifying a great work of literature is its ability to make the reader feel both pleasure and discomfort. By this standard, do you think that Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is a great work of literature?
- ii) One of the more unusual things in the novel is its inclusion of so many maps and diagrams. How effective are these in helping us see the world through Christopher's eyes?
- iii) Does the novel's intensive look at Christopher's fascinating and often profound mental life suggest that, in certain ways, the pity that well-meaning 'normal' people might feel for him is misdirected?

4. Choose one of the three discussion questions in activity 3 and write a paragraph reporting your opinion. Write on the back of this paper and hand in your work at the beginning of next week's class.

## Endnotes

- i In language-testing terms, this could probably be approximated as a score between 400 and 800 in TOEIC, between 41 and 95 in TOEFL (IBT) or between 4.0 and 7.5 in IELTS.
- ii Hino, Nobuyuki. "The Yakudoku Tradition of Foreign Language Literacy in Japan." Cross-cultural literacy: global perspectives on reading and writing. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Ed. Fraida Dubin and Natalie A. Kuhlman. 1992. Regents / Prentice Hall, 99-111.
- iii Porcaro, James W. "Promoting progressive change in the work of secondary school JTEs" *Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Toyama University of International Studies*, Issue 4. 80-87. Mar. 2004
- iv Gorsuch, G. "Yakudoku EFL instruction in two Japanese high school classrooms: An exploratory study." *JALT Journal*, 20 (1), 6-32. Mar. 1998
- v Takeda, C. "The application of phonics to the teaching of reading in junior high school English classes in Japan." *TESL Reporter*, 35 (2), 16-36. Sept. 2002
- vi Fujimoto-Adamson, Naoki. "Globalization and the History of English Education in Japan." *The Asian EFL Journal* Vol. 8, Issue 3. Sept. 2006  
[www.asian-efl-journal.com/sept\\_06\\_nfa.php](http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/sept_06_nfa.php)
- vii A brief outline of this kind of language instruction can be found on this British Council website:  
<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/content-based-instruction>
- viii European Commission. (1995) *White Paper - Teaching and learning. Towards the learning society*  
Available online here:  
[http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white\\_papers/pdf/com95\\_590\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com95_590_en.pdf)
- ix The National Autistic Society: *What is Autism?*  
<http://www.autism.org.uk/About-autism/Autism-and-Asperger-syndrome-an-introduction/What-is-autism.aspx>
- x "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that about 1 in 88 children has been identified with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This data comes from the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, which estimated the number of 8-year-old children with ASDs living in 14 communities throughout the United States in 2008. This new estimate marks a 23% increase since our last report in 2009, and a 78% increase since our first report in 2007."  
<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/AutismPrevalence/index.html>
- xi In addition to *Rain Man* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, other examples are:  
From television, the character J.J. Jones played by Ollie Barbieri in the series *Skins* from Company Pictures or the character Sheldon Cooper played by Jim Parsons in *The Big Bang Theory* from Warner Bros. Television.  
From movies, the character Simon Lynch played by Mike Hughes in *Mercury Rising* from Universal Pictures or the character Michael Barth played by Bradley Pierce in *Cries from the Heart* from CBS.  
From literature, the character Seth Garin in Stephen King's *The Regulators* or the character Crake in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*.
- xii *Rain Man*. Special Edition. Dir. Barry Levinson. Perf. Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise 1988. MGM Home Entertainment, 2004. DVD.

- xiii Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2004.
- xiv *The Boy With the Incredible Brain I-V*. YouTube. Web. 22 July 2011.
- xv Course evaluation data are taken from standard course evaluation questionnaires that are distributed in all University of Tokyo *zenki* English classes each semester. The data used in this paper relate to questionnaires that were distributed in July 2011.
- xvi It should be noted the chapters are not numbered as in a traditional novel, but with prime numbers. Hence the first five chapters are chapters 2, 3, 5, 7 and 11. The narrator explains that this device reflects his affinity with mathematics in general and prime numbers in particular. The chapters themselves are very short and these first five chapters cover only seven pages in total.

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