

An Alternative Approach to Survival English

Sean Thornton*^a,

^aDepartment of Life Sciences, Toyo University,
Gunma, Japan,

*sean@toyo.jp

Abstract

This paper charts the attempt to develop a survival English course that focuses more on the ‘survival’ than on the English – this course is called “Survive...” It briefly outlines the established field of survival English before departing into a qualitative account of developing, refining, and evaluating the alternative course developed. It will focus primarily on the final year of the research which featured both field testing of the course with classes of students, and regular attempts to secure publication options. Some discussion about the nature of compulsory education will feature. Among the findings are that the students were largely receptive to the subject matter, but the publishers were not. It concludes that disasters are not optional, so studying them should be compulsory.

Keywords: Survival English, ESL, compulsory education, publishing

Introduction

This paper begins by identifying the objectives, questions, and theory behind the alternative approach to survival English that is the focus of the work. It then conducts a literature review of the field as it currently stands, and also introduces the preparation and survivalism aspect of the new approach. The methodology is primarily an account of the development of the course and the language theory that influenced it. The findings offered cover those from the students’ survey as well as some commentary of the teacher’s and publishers’ response to the course. The discussion is brief due to many of the key issues being dealt with in other sections. A stark appraisal of the new approach is featured in the limitations and recommendations section. A conclusion precedes the bibliography and appendices.

Objectives

The objective of this research is to develop a survival English course that focuses more on survival than on English, by teaching the former through the latter. This objective is aided by the use of the first draft of the course book “Survive...”

Research Questions

Is an alternative approach to survival English, which focuses on studying emergency preparedness and disaster survival skills through English, a valid and viable way to spend compulsory English lesson class time?

Theory

Survival English ordinarily centres on teaching language skills for dealing with day to day situations faced by English learners in an environment where they need to use English to get by. This includes: business trips, recreational trips, and recent migration. The alternative approach of this research is to step away from normal circumstances, and

into extreme conditions such as: natural disasters, social upheaval, and theoretically possible emergency scenarios.

It was in part inspired by the general expectation that, in many countries, university students must undertake compulsory English courses whether or not such study is necessarily relevant to their other areas of study or future expectations regarding lifestyle or career choice. Mainstream university level English study textbooks tend to focus on perfectly reasonable mundane topics such as hobbies, interests, travel experiences or plans. These are things that most students have some degree of choice and agency in – unlike the matter of whether or not they study English. Disaster situations, like some study courses, are not optional.

Earthquakes, pandemics, and the outbreak of war, are compulsory for anybody who lives where they happen to occur. It is the contention of this research that some amount of compulsory study time should be spent on students considering, and mentally preparing for, these non-optional occurrences. The origins of compulsory education can be traced back to the Frederick II of the Prussian empire who implemented it in response to military defeat with a view to girding the nation (Soysal & Strang, 1989, p278). In this way this alternative approach to survival English could be said to take compulsory education back closer to its roots.

Literature Review

Survival English refers to the essential English that a person who visits an English speaking environment needs to know and learn in order to live and/or work there. These students may fall into many different categories which include: going on holiday, studying overseas, business trips, and migration. Teachers of survival English cover essential English that will be useful for these students to deal with everyday issues such as: asking for directions, ordering a meal in a restaurant, finding an address, attending meetings, and small talk, among others. Since most students of survival English are beginners, teachers typically keep things simple, and focus on teaching the basics (Verner n.d.).

Before embarking on teaching survival English, it is important for teachers to do a need analysis of the students to know what they want. After knowing their needs, it is important to teach the things that mostly matter, depending on the situation the students are in (Mckay, 2004, p8). For instance, if the students are attending a conference, it would make sense to teach them on how to properly introduce themselves, or how to ask general questions in English. If the students are staying at a hotel during their visit, start by teaching them how to order meals or how to ask for room service. If they are on holiday teach them on how to ask for directions or how to properly give an address to a taxi driver. Survival English teachers emphasize function over grammar. The main goal is to enable students to perform specific tasks. Although role-plays are a common way to practice, teachers should cover reading, writing, and listening in addition to speaking because all may prove relevant (Cooper 2012). Teachers should keep in mind that the goal is not to learn all the topics of English but to grasp the basics so as to survive in an English speaking environment.

Over the years, teaching survival English has undergone tremendous changes as a result of variation in the trends and purposes of people visiting English speaking countries. According to Cooper (2012) the goal of teaching Survival English is to produce competent students who use English as the mode of communication. One major trend that has manifested in teaching survival English is that many countries have started teaching English (in general) in earlier grades at school. Therefore, there are fewer students who learn survival English, as most countries have adopted the teaching of English (Velmer n.d.).

Another trend in teaching survival English is the use of technology to teach and application of e-learning. Tablets, mobile phones, and laptops are being used to teach, a trend that is quickly replacing the use of textbooks. These are an important resource and they have made teaching English easier. By use of the internet, students can easily do research on the basics, and confirm what they have been taught (Velmer n.d.).

Although technology has a major influence on the teaching and learning of survival English, there have been a lot of disagreements in several areas such as teaching grammar, language skills and testing, and vocabulary. For instance, while the use of electronic translators provides many benefits to students and teachers, they may encourage the selection of the wrong English words. They may also hinder fluency to students (Barrett and Shama 2007, p. 12). Special care should be given by the teachers on the issues of content, purpose, expectations and motivation.

Another trend is the element of cultural aspect in the teaching of survival English (Haynes 2013, p. 20). This will depend on where they come from, and where they are going. Some cultural aspects taught may involve body language, etiquette, punctuality expectations, or basic rules such as how to cross the road. When teaching survival English to adults, it is important to provide practical and useful language such as vocabulary phrases for their survival in English countries. Functional survival English will include things such as how to greet friends, how to shop for commodities or how to prepare for an interview if that is their main business.

Generally, the teaching methods used by the teachers should aim at helping the students achieve the purpose of their visit. Lessons should be as practical as possible so that students extract maximum value from them. Students should be given a chance to speak and interact because doing so will facilitate their understanding.

Survivalism and emergency preparedness (often called “prepping”) refer to a set of hobbies, skills, or lifestyle choices that some people cultivate in order to ready themselves for ‘end of the world as we know it’ scenarios such as: natural disasters, war or invasion, societal or economic collapse, or pandemics. Survivalism seems to be primarily concerned with living in the wilderness for an extended period, many of the skills involved are an extension of camping, but it is often cast as one option on how to deal with a national level crisis. Prepping is more focused on staying where you are when disaster strikes and being ready to get by in the face of the loss of modern conveniences such as super markets, plumbed water, and electricity. Both variants are very much concerned with acquiring or maintain fundamental necessities such as clean water, safe food, basic medical treatment, and general security. The most rudimentary level of involvement with these skill sets would be basic awareness of what might happen, and how you could react to it. The next level up would be modest involvement – adopting some hobbies that are survival relevant. The most intense advocates of prepping/survivalism shape their whole lifestyle around it in terms of where they choose to live and even what careers they pursue. The course being developed is primarily concerned with developing basic awareness of the topic.

Methodology

The development of the course was preceded by extensive reading and consideration of books and websites that attend to the topics of: survival English, survivalism and prepping. These terms are each outlined in the literature review.

This course is essentially an adaptation of the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) to language education. “CALLA combines English language development with content-based ESL and adds learner strategies that help students understand and remember important concepts.” (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, p9).

CALLA method is typically applied to teaching mainstream curriculum subjects such as math, science, and social studies, but in an ESL (English as a Second Language) context. The topic content is flexible and can be replaced with the disaster survival subject matter.

CALLA is a four skills language approach with a number of learning strategies (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, p19-20) that are incorporated into the "Survive..." lesson structure detailed below. The primary point of divergence between "Survive..." and CALLA is that the later is intended to help integrate ESL students into a study environment that is all in English while this research was conducted in an EFL context where the students all shared the same L1 (native language) – Japanese. Indeed, CALLA could be said to be a cross between Survival English and EAP (English for Academic Purposes).

With the background research complete the basic lesson to lesson structure of the course was determined. Some amount of the course design was dictated by the combined facts that the course would be tested and refined with university students undertaking compulsory English lessons (one 90 minute lesson per week, for a series of 15 weeks, one class of 1st grade students, another of 2nd & 3rd grade), and that the eventually primary target market for the course is compulsory study for adults where the entire course takes between 15 and 30 hours.

Each unit of the text deals with a single survival topic. An initially extensive list of possible topics was compiled in consultation with prepper materials and then 15 topics were chosen from within that list. The selection criteria for these 15 topics were: how essential the topic was, and how universal it is, for example: a unit about finding and purifying water was deemed essential because without water we not only die but in the meantime cooking and cleaning become very difficult. Meanwhile, a favourite topic of prepper literature is guns, however, guns are not essential to survival unless one is in a context where everybody else has a gun, and in many communities guns are simply not available, so decisions about them are unlikely to need to be made. The sequence of the units was approximately chronological beginning just before disaster strikes, then moving forward into survival issues concerned with the 1st hour, day, week, and month, before transitioning into dealing with a long term crisis situation.

In order to focus on the content rather than the lesson mechanics the lesson to lesson structure was consistent for each unit. Each unit was only two pages long and included (in this order): a title, a vocabulary image, 11 items of vocabulary, a translation activity, a dictation activity, a grammar guide box, a group activity, a cloze reading task, a context image and a debate topic. Throughout the book written instructions were minimal and vague – this was a deliberate choice because it gives the teacher greater flexibility to adjust and adapt tasks without directly contradicting the written instructions. A teacher's guide was also produced to give suggestions for instructions and variations on the task types.

The vocabulary image was sometimes used to introduce the topic, other times to clarify some of the vocab. The vocabulary was drilled in an oral chant, then the students would attempt to translate each item, then a lottery system was used to have individual students share one of their translations. This section employs: imagery, auditory representation, resourcing and grouping (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, p18-19).

Selected vocabulary items were then included in sentence long dictations which the students needed to listen to and attempt to write down. Before the answers were revealed they were encouraged to compare their answers with each other. Dictation practices the skills of self-monitoring, self-evaluation and deduction (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, p18-19).

Each unit's group activity was variable and typically involved the group making a decision about an issue related to the topic and then delivering their findings to the class. Some examples include: planning a small farm (what crops, what animals, why?), choosing which vehicles you should use if you have X drivers and Y passengers to go Z distance, deciding which items should take priority when putting together an emergency bag. Elaboration, transfer, and cooperation were the strategies most commonly employed here (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, p18~19).

The cloze reading activity was based on authentic texts, and was a random escalating cloze task. This meant that the words removed were not chosen with use or meaning in mind, the 1st word to be removed would be the 13th word of the text, the 2nd would be 12 words after that, the 3rd 11 words after that, and so on until it was time to reset back to 13. This was intended to be difficult and to reflect the random and chaotic nature of a disaster situation. For the lower level class in particular, it was so difficult that it was often resolved as a listen and fill in the gaps task. When done as a cloze it evoked selective attention and inferencing in particular (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, p18~19).

The debate topics were sometimes operated as free form discussions, other times as voting for options, never as fully engaged debate activities – given more than 90 minutes per week that may have been on option.

Findings

Towards the end of each course an anonymous survey was issued to the students. The survey was bilingual and multiple-choice. An English only version can be found in the appendix. It asked for opinions about: studying English in general, being a student in general, general appraisal of the course, and the effectiveness of the course as a method for both learning English and learning how to prepare for disaster situations, and a section for students to identify which units they preferred or disliked.

There were 82 completed surveys to draw some insights from. Only 2 students declared the course not interesting with the rest deeming it quite or very interesting, and 23 among those identifying it as more interesting than other study courses. Only 6 students declared the course not useful, 45 said it was useful for studying English and 36 that it was useful for studying survival preparation (they could choose: either, neither, or both). Although it seemed in class that the students were finding it difficult, 34 labelled it as being about the same difficulty as other English courses, and only 4 said in the survey that it was too difficult. No unit received an overall negative rating, nor was any the recipient of zero "likes". The top five rated units (in descending order) were: first aid, worst case scenarios, stealth & self-defence, farming, and hygiene

The other major finding of the research was that publishers were not interested in developing this course as a product. Multiple online submissions were made to both international and local publishers, primarily in the field of English language teaching, but also some publishers that specialize in prepper books. Numerous publishers were also approached at academic conferences and book fairs. The format of the book was clearly an issue – 2 page long units were seen as far too short, and neither the claims that it was enough given the projected length of the course, nor the fact that such a short book would be less expensive to produce, were deemed to be decent counter arguments to this. The bigger problem was that content was held to be too fringe, and the course too difficult to market. The philosophy of the book being that: disasters are not optional, and so this course should be compulsory, failed to persuade any publisher to take it on. In the less formal setting of talking with the staff of publishers at conferences one of the most common responses was to look into self-publication options.

Discussion

As mentioned above, and detailed below, the course has numerous short comings and will be subject to extensive revision.

The student reaction to the course was consistently good to adequate. This positive response may be boosted by the fact that the students were all Japanese and in Japan, and thus are very aware that natural disasters are a possible part of their future. The use of vocabulary drilling and translation seemed to work well as a way of easing the class into each topic. There was some concern that the dictations may not have been very appealing, but the majority of the students engaged well with that part of each lesson. The group activities occasionally went very well with students immediately getting to grips with the concepts and decisions and seeming very engaged in the ideas – this was particularly true when they were asked to plan a small scale farm. On a number of other occasions it took them time to build momentum, and sometimes the output at the end was modest, but in all cases the great majority of students demonstrated that they had understood the topic, and thought critically about that aspect of survival. The student engagement and response very much affirmed that the course was a legitimate thing to develop and teach.

This alternative approach to survival English is certainly not meant to replace existing survival English courses which serve a very specific purpose which needs to be met. It is intended as a brief detour from general English study, into using English to consider something that could prove more important to have thought about than anything else the students have ever studied. Many university students undertake multiple compulsory English study courses. Compulsory English study is well aligned with some of the historically common reasons for compulsory study: it may serve an economic purpose, it may serve a social purpose, and gaining competence with a new language is a potentially valuable personal achievement (Soysal & Strang, 1989, p279).

Among the core purposes attributed to compulsory education is “distributing to all citizens the knowledge and skills necessary for them to make meaningful use of their basic liberties” (Reidy, 2001, p587). Liberty may prove much harder to sustain under any number of disasters conditions. Any efforts made to prepare for such events may prove the difference between the collapse of liberty, or its sustenance. It is the contention of this research that adding the survival element to the language study boosts its intrinsic worth without any significant detrimental consequence. A course like this should be seriously considered as being worthy of one compulsory schedule slot from within a student’s schedule. The most significant counter argument presented against this position (during the research) was: “shouldn’t they just study this topic in their native language?” Yes, they should. That is only an argument for more time being set aside in their schedules to study such things in their own languages; it is not an argument against also having them study it in English.

The publishers that were approached, and at least responded, tended to feel that the course was too hard to market. I think this may be partly a failure of the course author to convey that this is supposed to be a compulsory course. The matter was also raised that there are too many sensitive issues featured in the book, for example: being dirty, stealing, violence and fearful situations in general. It is true to say that this course would be totally out of place in any institution that isn’t comfortable with students facing the grim reality that sometimes (very) bad things happen. It could also be said that the place of education is to teach people something useful, rather than just shielding them from anything that isn’t nice, or easy.

Limitations & Recommendations

The course requires extensive development before it will be ready to either re-seek publication with established publishers, or look into self-publication options.

Superficially there are two major changes: narrative and cast. At present the book follows a chronological sequence of events but without a clear narrative. The art work in the book is not consistent, and features a range of unrelated and unidentified characters. These characters will be replaced with a clearly identified cast, each of whom will display individual aptitudes and flaws in relation to dealing with certain challenges presented by each topic in turn. The narrative will be more explicit, and follow the story of how these characters survive through the changes in their circumstances.

As noted above, 2 page units were deemed insufficient by all the publishers approached, furthermore some feedback indicated that each unit seemed cramped. Without any substantial modification of the content the book could easily be expanded to 4 page units. An ideal development would be to further add a double page comic book style spread that could incorporate the vocabulary and some grammar patterns. That would take the book comfortably up to 6 page units. However, that would greatly increase both the amount of art work and the complexity of the narrative and incorporation of language points.

Pedagogically, the grammar sections as they current exist are weak and need a substantial amount of further development. The cloze reading tasks consistently seemed to be too difficult, and their placement towards the end of each unit was also not ideal. Whether instead of the comic strips, or in addition to them, a non-cloze reading passage to introduce the topic of each unit should be added nearer the start of each unit. This will either be placed immediately after the vocabulary section, or incorporate the unit vocabulary into it. The group activities and dictations will remain, but perhaps with the dictations being moved closer to the end of the unit as a consolidation activity. The single question debates will be re-titled as discussions, because actual debates are a specialised form of discourse. Additionally, more than one discussion question will be listed. If it is determined that there is space, or a need for more content, the cloze activity may remain in some form (perhaps as a suggested homework activity), and a possible addition would be role plays.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the progress and setbacks involved in the development of an alternative approach to survival English. It identified survival English in the normal sense of the term, and outlined survivalism and emergency preparedness and the role they play in this course. It charted the development, implementation and evaluation the course in terms of: content, pedagogy and marketability. It seems to have identified that the challenge moving forward is to improve the overall quality of the course (both pedagogically and superficially) so that potential publishers may give it enough consideration to actually realize that the under lying rationale: “disasters aren’t optional, so this course should be compulsory”, is a valid one, and there is a market for it.

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Appendix

(An English only version of the survey which also lists the topics for each unit.)

Survive! - End of course survey

Section 1: general topics

1. How do you feel about studying English?
 - ☐ I like studying English.
 - ☐ I don't like studying English.
 - ☐ I don't mind studying English.
2. How do you feel about being a student?
 - ☐ I'm happy to be a student.
 - ☐ I don't mind being a student.
 - ☐ I would rather get a job.
 - ☐ I would rather do something else (not be a student, not get a job).

Section 2: Survive! (The book & course)

3. How did you feel about the art?
 - ☐ I liked it.
 - ☐ I didn't like it.
 - ☐ It was so-so.
 - ☐ Black & White was good.
 - ☐ It would be better if it was in color.
4. How did you feel about the difficulty of the course?

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- ☐ It was OK.
 - ☐ It was too difficult.
 - ☐ It was quite easy.
 - ☐ It was more difficult than other English courses.
 - ☐ It was about the same as other English courses.
5. How interesting did you find the course?
- ☐ It was very interesting.
 - ☐ It was quite interesting.
 - ☐ It was not interesting.
 - ☐ It was more interesting than other study courses.
 - ☐ It was less interesting than other study courses.
6. How useful do you think this course was?
- ☐ It was not useful.
 - ☐ It was useful for studying English.
 - ☐ It was useful for studying survival preparation.
7. Looking at all the topics, which were better and/or worse?
- ☐ Worst case scenarios
 - ☐ Stockpiling
 - ☐ Emergency Bags
 - ☐ First Aid
 - ☐ Water
 - ☐ Cooking
 - ☐ Hygiene
 - ☐ Logistics
 - ☐ Stealth & Self-Defense
 - ☐ Tools
 - ☐ Natural Remedies
 - ☐ Farming
 - ☐ Bartering
 - ☐ Ethics
 - ☐ Pets & Children