

An Analysis of Content-based Language Instruction at a Japanese University

Kevin Meehan

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to analyze the effectiveness of content-based instruction (CBI) in a course at a Japanese university. In this paper, I briefly explain the background of second-language content-based instruction, describe the framework of an actual CBI program, report on my observations of this program, and follow it by a discussion. My observations indicate that CBI can be very successful in teaching the second language to Japanese university students. Although it is an effective method, the students' lack of background knowledge presents some limitations. I detail how to overcome such limitations.

BACKGROUND

CBI is a teaching method that has gained in popularity in second-language instruction programs over the past 30 years. This method finds its origins in *The Language Across the Curriculum* (LAC), *English for Specific Purposes* (ESP), and Immersion Programs. There are some differences among these approaches in how they implement CBI, but the overall core philosophy remains the same.

LAC began in Britain and is derived from the idea that first language instruction should cross over all subject matter domains. Students are instructed not only to learn to write and read but also encouraged to write to learn and read to learn for the full participation in the education process (Britton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989). Also, students learn language skills required in academic reading and writing during the learning process. This first language teaching approach has influenced research in second language instruction.

The objective of ESP is the development of communicative abilities within a specific field and/or activity. This method is best suited for adult learners who have

the goal to use English in a specific content area in academic or occupational settings. The syllabi and materials are developed through the analysis of students' specific language objectives. The use of authentic materials and attention to real-life situations are the key features of this methodology of content-based models in which the major component is experiential language learning in context (Britton, et al, 1989). *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP), which focuses on learners' language development.

Immersion programs started in Canada in the 1960s with the goal to provide English-speaking students with the opportunity to learn French. This program was based on the idea that students should be exposed to the target language intensively through natural communication with a native speaker while still in their early educational development. The immersion programs, most notably the St. Lambert Experiment in Montreal (Lambert and Tucker 1972), were influential in bringing CBI methodology to the attention of second and foreign language educators everywhere. The Canadian model was adopted for similar programs in the United States.

CBI MODELS

The three CBI models are the sheltered model, the adjunct model and the theme-based model. The following descriptions detail the characteristics contained in each model:

1 . THE SHELTERED MODEL

Sheltered CBI is usually found at universities in English L1 contexts. This is for content courses taught in the L2 using linguistically sensitive teaching strategies in order to make content accessible to learners who have less than native-like proficiency (Britton, et al, 1989). It is called "sheltered" because learners are given special assistance to help them understand regular classes. Two instructors work together in teaching a specific subject. One instructor does the content teaching while the other instructor is in charge of the language teaching. They may teach together or the class time may be divided between the two of them. This method has been used successfully at the University of Ottawa, where students are taught in English and French content courses. Sheltered courses are content-driven where

students are evaluated in terms of content learning, and language learning is secondary.

2 . THE ADJUNCT MODEL

In adjunct CBI courses the instructors are trained in ESL. The aim is to prepare students for mainstream classes in which they join English L1 learners. Students are expected to learn content material while simultaneously acquiring academic language proficiency. The adjunct model resembles EPA or ESP classes in which the emphasis is placed on acquiring specific target vocabulary and study skills like note-taking, skimming, and scanning texts.

3 . THEME-BASED MODEL

Theme-based CBI is more commonly found in EFL contexts. Theme-based courses are language -driven and have as its goals the development of students' L2 skills and academic proficiency. The themes are selected based on their potential to contribute to the learner's language growth in specific topical or functional domains. Unlike the other two models, L2 learners in theme-based classes are taught by language instructors who evaluate the students in terms of their language growth and not necessarily for mastery of the content. The content learning is incidental.

Description of Program

The CBI program that I observed is a themed-based model at a private co-ed Japanese university located in Saitama. This program has been in operation for the last five years and includes required courses for only first year English department students. The course is titled "Lecture Workshop" and is a combination of lectures by instructors and activities in which students are actively engaged in interaction with their fellow classmates and the material. The stated goal of this course is for students to develop their overall English language skills while learning about specific topics.

Course Outline

Each Lecture Workshop course lasts for a duration of seven weeks. Students take Lecture Workshop I in the spring term and Lecture Workshop II in the fall

term. They take two lecture series a term, for a total of four lecture series in a year. Instructors teach the same seven-week content-based course four times a year. Topics to be taught in the class are decided by each individual teacher. The topics should be current and stimulating.

Classes start with a short lecture. For the lectures the university recommends that instructors lecture no more than ten minutes each time, and then get students to summarize the talk in pairs. This may be repeated several times throughout each class.

The main part of each class consists of activities in which students are actively engaged in discussing what is being taught. The aim is to get students to interact with their classmates and to access the material in such a way as to acquire the content of the course. Subsequently, instructors are expected to provide an extension of their lectures in the form of a hands-on component to foster thinking among the students with the aim for them to actualize the information they have learned.

Students are required to maintain a portfolio for the Lecture Workshop course in which they keep their class notes, homework assignments and handouts. They must submit their folders for a grade at the end of the course.

Materials

Instructors are free to choose their own materials. The instructors do not use a course textbook as each lecture series meets only seven weeks.

Evaluation

Students are given one final semester grade averaged out over two Lecture Workshop courses based on the following criteria:

- 1.) Attendance
- 2.) Class performance, and
- 3.) Portfolio

Observations

I observed a Lecture Workshop with a focus on International Relations. The students came from the top-level tier in a TOEIC score range from 750 and above. The class was made up of 26 students.

I observed the second week class, which specifically focused on China- Japan relations. The instructor began the lesson with a 15-minute lecture at a near-native level pace while students took notes throughout the talk. The instructor showed the class an outline of his lecture on the OHP and also used maps, photographs, and newspaper headlines. These visual aids appeared to be very helpful in guiding students along the lecture by highlighting the complexities associated with the topic.

Following the lecture the instructor put the students into random groups of three members each and gave each group the task of making up a summary of the lecture and the topic, which they finished as a homework assignment. The students were expected to discuss the task work together and to identify the key issues within the relations. The instructor circulated around each group and monitored their discussion and occasionally asked them thought-provoking questions. At the end of the discussion each group made a presentation of their findings to class.

During the group discussion the instructor wrote some cause-effect scenarios on the board for learners to predict possible outcomes to the relations. One example given was “How would China react if your [the students] Prime Minister is making a speech to apologize for Japan’s actions during World War II to the Chinese Prime Minister, while back in Tokyo his cabinet ministers are visiting Yasukuni Shrine.”

In the final part of the task, each group must write their findings on the board. Afterwards, the instructor goes over their answers and explains any major implications they may have in terms of the two countries’ relations and tries to correlate their ideas into a coherent understanding.

As an overall extension of the class work, the instructor created a Yahoo Group Page for the class with files of homework readings and links related to all the topics covered in the course. In addition, students filled out action logs on-line after each class.

DISCUSSION

The basic concept of content-based instruction is that language is the medium of learning. Mohan (1986) quoted Cazden’s interesting remark mentioning that a language is a system that relates what is being talked about (content) and the means used to talk about it (expression).

We must always remember that language is learned, not because we

want to talk or read or write about language, but because we want to talk and read and write about the world. Only linguists have language as their subject matter. For the rest of us—especially for children—language is the medium of interpersonal relationships, the medium of our mental life, the medium of learning about the world (Cazden, 1977, p.42).

The major obstacle for the instructor and students in the class that I observed was the issue of background knowledge of the topic. The instructor had to know how to fill -in these major historical gaps in the students' knowledge base in the limited time frame of a seven-week intensive course. The topic was on Japan-China relations but all most all the students knew very little of the Second World War and of the current state of relations between the two countries. Eskey notes that student background knowledge plays an important role as a building block for new learning (1997). Prior content knowledge, then, is key to understanding new information and concepts and can facilitate comprehension when content is taught through the L2. This should be a major consideration when choosing reading materials for a CBI course.

In order to fully grasp the topic and to be capable of discussing it in groups, it is essential that students develop their critical thinking skills. What I observed in some of the group discussions was that some students were open to speaking and interacting but they could not give any concrete input or add to any historical insights. Cummins (1984, 1989) contends that individuals develop two types of language proficiency: Cognitive Academic Language (CALP) and the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). BICS is a set of social interactive language skills, which is characterized by more face-to-face interaction including nonverbal and contextual clues. CALP is a set of proficiency skills, which requires cognitive abilities to conduct more academic tasks. In my observation, students communicated in very general terms about what they thought about, without giving any real support to their opinions such as examples, explanations, or reasons. There was a need for them to try and ask some critical questions about the topic to their group members and/or instructor.

The instructor indicated that a challenging aspect in teaching this particular course was that of taking a complex idea or issue and trying to explain it in a few sentences. In CBI many learning opportunities are provided in which students have

to incorporate all four language skills in order to promote their cognitive skills. Kasper (1994) highlights the necessity of developing activities that integrate and reinforce the four basic language skills and gives the example of her reading course for junior college ESL students learning marketing as a content subject. The course consists of four steps: pre-reading activities, factual work, discussion, and analysis to establish background knowledge and to form schemata.

In the class that I observed, students had to complete weekly readings, write summaries and post them on the class web page, in addition to commenting on another student's summary from the web page. These assignments were completed before each class meeting. Later in class, during the group discussion, students talked about their written summaries. This is an example of force output (Swain 1985), getting learners to first write then later verbalize their summaries and comments. Swain and Lapkin (1995) have noted four functions of output in SLA. Its first function is to make learners aware of gaps in their knowledge, referred as "noticing." Noticing gaps "may trigger cognitive processes which might generate linguistic knowledge that is new for the learner, or that consolidates their existing knowledge" (Swain, 1995, p.126). The second function is to serve language learning through hypothesis testing, and the third function is metalinguistic in nature: Output serves to control and internalize linguistic knowledge. The fourth function is to enhance fluency through practice.

A core component of the Lecture Workshop program is action logging. Action logging (Murphey, 1992) requires students to evaluate all the parts of the class and give feedback to the instructor after every class. Students evaluate the activities, themselves, and things they liked and did not like. The feedback is important to teachers who can then make the necessary adjustments to their teaching approach and syllabus.

Conclusion

The integration of language and content instruction has been a growing phenomenon in the language field with more and more Japanese universities adding CBI programs to their curricula. CBI courses provide students with much needed exposure to language learning through content learning that is often absent in the more common form-focused learning classes. The Lecture Workshop offers many learning opportunities to students that the more traditional form-focused programs lack. The program has had a positive effect on students and teachers alike.

References

- Britton, D.M., Snow, M.A & Wesche, M.B. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction*. New York: Newbury House.
- Cazaden, C.B. (1977). Language, Literacy and Literature. *The National Elementary Principal*, 57 (1), 40-52. National Association of Elementary School Principals.
- Chamot, A.U. & O'Malley, J.M. (1994). *The CALLA handbook: Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approaches*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Cummins, J. (1989). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Eskey, David, (1997). "Syllabus Design in Content-Based Instruction." In: Snow and Britton (eds.) *The Content-Based Classroom*. New York: Longman.
- Lambert,Wallace E. and G. Richard Tucker. (1972). *Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experiment*. Rowley: Ma: Newbury House.
- Mohan, B. A. (1986). *Language and content*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Murphey , T. (1992). Action logging: Letting the students in on the teacher training processes. *The Teacher Trainer*, 6 (2), 20-21. *A practical Journal For Those Who Train, Mentor and Educate TESOL Teachers*. Pilgrim LTD.
- Murphey , T. (1997). A CBI Curriculum Innovation: Nanzan's Revolving Six Week Workshops. *The Language Teacher* 21(6) 25-29. The Japan Association for Language Teaching.
- Snow, M., & Britton, D. M. (Eds.) (1997). *The content-based classroom: Perspectives on integrating language and content*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Swain. M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honour of H.G. Widdowson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive process they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 16, 371-391.