

Teaching Theme · Content Based Courses in Japan: Issues and Strategies

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Abstract

This essay will consider the issues related to and strategies for teaching “Theme” or “Content” based courses in English for Japanese native speakers on the university level based on the case study of teaching the content-based course “Introducing Japanese Culture in English.”

History

The origins of teaching a second language or foreign language in Content Based Instruction (CBI) arose in several places for different purposes. One of the earliest examples of using CBI for teaching a second language was in the case of South African students, when it was found in 1946 that these students made substantial language gain through this methodology (Pally, 2000). In the 1960s, Canada instituted an immersion program for teaching French to English speaking kindergarteners, with the regular school curriculum taught in French by a French-speaking instructor (Okazaki, 1997). In the 1970s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses were developed in England around a curriculum for students in specific academic or professional fields, such as science and technology, soon after which this approach was also adopted in some schools in North America. In the 1980s, based on the Canadian example and Krashen’s influential “comprehensible input theory,” American schools began to apply CBI-type courses on the elementary educational level (Hanna, 2002).

In the 1978, the Japanese Ministry of Education initiated a program to introduce native English speakers into the curriculum of high school English classes, later expanded in 1987 as the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) program to include junior highs schools, in order to improve foreign language education in a rudimentary attempt along the Canadian

model of using native speakers for natural communication to provide authenticity and enhance motivation. However, it was far from an immersion program and, at least in the early years of the program, the foreign instructors merely served as living recorders for pronunciation practice and drill exercises. In the late 1990s-early 2000s, Japanese universities began to introduce CBI-type courses into their English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum, variously called “Theme” or “Contents English.” However, the situation of foreign language education in Japan is significantly different from that of Europe or America, which raises a number of issues regarding the applicability of the CBI method in Japanese universities.

Issues

From the examples mentioned above it can be seen that prior to Japan, the CBI methodology was primarily applied to either speakers of the same language family as the second language being taught (French being taught to English speakers, both of the European language family) or that the students were of a very young age so therefore still had a high level of innate language acquisition aptitude. Another issue involved is that, except in the case of young children, it is taken for granted that sufficient prior language education has been provided as a foundation for teaching a CBI course in a second language. Krashen (1982, 1985) proposed that CBI courses should be taught at a level just slightly above the learner’s competence in the foreign language. However, that competence needs to be provided prior to the CBI course.

Furthermore, Cummins (1984, 1989) submits two types of language proficiency: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BIKS) for face-to-face interactive language skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) for proficiency in cognitive skills necessary for academic learning. While he contends that BICS is acquired first, usually within the first year or two of instruction, in the case of Japan, Japanese students are more highly developed in CALP, typically being proficient in reading essays and answering exam questions, and significantly less advanced in BICS in regard to English language acquisition. Despite the high level of CALP proficiency of Japanese students, they are largely untrained in critical thinking until the university level and are inadequately prepared in BIKS skills to contend with a CBI course taught in a foreign language.

Moreover, typically in the European and American educational system, students are taught in their national or native language courses the basics of how to take notes, make an outline, and write a term paper. Whereas in Japan, Japanese students are seldom formally taught how to

prepare for and write a term paper. In addition, Japanese education applies more weight to the memorization of information than applying critical thinking.

In contrast to Europe or the US, Japanese university students are unprepared or under-prepared for listening to a lecture in a second language, despite six years of required secondary school English education. They have inadequate basic vocabulary and have not been taught strategies in coping with an immersion in course taught in a foreign language. In the case of the US, usually there is a one year preparatory ESL course for foreign students admitted to the university, but again such a course is typically oriented for students whose native language is one of the European language families.

As a result, when teaching a CBI course in English for Japanese students, it is necessary, along with the basic content of the course subject, to teach vocabulary, strategies for reading and listening in a foreign language, how to take notes and write an outline, how to write a paper and make an oral presentation, and the critical thinking necessary to produce even a short research paper or presentation. As can be seen, a great deal of responsibility for imparting basic academic skills is placed on the instructor teaching a CBI course in Japan. With these difficulties in mind, it remains to be seen how such a course can be successfully taught at a Japanese university.

Case Study

I am using as a case study a course titled “Introducing Japanese Culture in English” that I have taught at different Japanese universities over a number years. The description of the course on the syllabus is as follows:

This course serves to prepare students to talk sensibly about their own culture when talking with exchange students, and in the future, their foreign colleagues at the workplace.

Furthermore, it will allow students to enjoy and gain a greater appreciation of their own culture, and enable them to understand how Japanese culture is seen abroad.

A variety of materials will be used, including essays and videos, by both foreign and Japanese authors to consider the differences between Western and Japanese understanding of Japanese culture.

Class meetings will include vocabulary quizzes, short reading and listening practice, group discussion of the material, questions and answers on the material, practice making an outline and taking notes.

At the end of the course, each student will submit a 4-5 page RESEARCH report on the Japanese cultural topic discussed in the class.

According to Leaver and Stryker (1989), four aspects are needed to successfully teach a CBI course: subject matter core, authentic materials, learning new information, and appropriateness to the specific needs of the students. In regard to subject matter, this topic serves the needs of the Japanese students because, as stated in the syllabus, it is likely that at some point they will need to present or discuss aspects of their native Japanese culture in English either as an exchange student abroad or with foreign visitors at the workplace. Furthermore, Japanese students appear to have a fair amount of inhibition concerning their own culture, in that they seem to feel that they should have an innate understanding of Japanese culture regardless of whether they have any interest in the subject matter or it has ever been imparted to them formally through instruction. Teaching Japanese culture in a foreign language allows the students the distance to reconsider their own culture and the buffer of the English language provides a defense granting them the freedom to explore Japanese culture without the stress of embarrassment. In addition, they learn of the high regard in which Japanese culture is held abroad and that there are foreign scholars who seriously study the subject. For the instructor, this subject provides the opportunity for her to teach in her specialty, and that interest is then communicated to the students, and once they acquire a genuine interest in the subject matter they are more eager to study. As a practical consideration, teaching Japanese culture also allows the students to use materials in their native language for their preparatory research for the term paper or oral presentation.

Teaching Methodology

1. Vocabulary Building

As the core subject matter of the course is being taught, it is necessary to concomitantly teach the strategies for comprehending subject matter presented in a foreign language (here, English). As mentioned above, students tend to have inadequate vocabulary to understand a lecture in English, and even if they have the vocabulary, which would be a rare case, they are taught it in written form and are not accustomed to hearing it spoken in a sentence, and typically not taught the strategy of picking up on known key words in a dialogue to gain a gist of the content. For that reason, I supply a handout for each unit of the subject matter with a list

of vocabulary terms in English. The students must look up the meaning of the terms themselves, and for the first exercise, write the definition in their native language (here, Japanese) and then again in English. The following week, they have a quiz on which they have to define the terms in English. I stress that when writing the definitions in English, they should make the definitions as short and simple as possible using vocabulary they already know. Through this process, by first looking up the words in Japanese, I am assured they have a basic understanding of the meaning, and then by writing their own definition in English, they acquire a sense of how the word is used in a broader English context.

2. Readings and Outlines

A second strategy that must be taught is how to prepare for listening to a lecture in English. As I tell my students, “Imagine you have just arrived in the US as an exchange student, all your courses are in English, how are you going to prepare for them so you can understand the lecture in English? The first thing you do is read up on the material in your native language, so that you have the basic content of what is likely to be presented in English.” To that end, I supply a short one or two page reading in Japanese for each unit. The students must make an outline, in both Japanese and English as homework (which I then later review and correct). The way to make an outline must be taught in class, since the students have not been previously taught. The purpose of first making the outline in Japanese from a Japanese text is to provide the base material from which to then write the English outline, and the English outline then supplies the key terms and phrases that are likely to occur in the lecture.

For the next exercise, the students are then supplied with an equally short text in English covering the same subject matter. This exercise would parallel the real situation of dealing with a required reading for a course taught in English abroad. The students must again make an outline of the reading in both Japanese and English. The purpose of first making the outline in Japanese from an English text is twofold, if the students are not made to write an outline in Japanese first, they merely copy sections of the English text word-for-word. Secondly, if the students really were taking a course abroad in English, it would be practical for them to make an outline or notes in their native language for ease of accessing specific portions of the text later (especially in the case of a longer text) and for review and study for an exam or report. It takes a fair amount of study and experience before one can actually think in a foreign language, especially with two languages as different as English and Japanese. The benefit of then writing the outline again in English is it compels the students to use their own vocabulary to write an

outline in English understandable to themselves. This practice will later in the course serve in good stead for preparing them to write a paper or a presentation in English.

3. Authentic Materials and Note-Taking

Once the students have been prepared by gaining the necessary vocabulary and the basic concept of the topic through authentic readings in both Japanese and English, for the first substantive class on the course subject, I show a 20 minute video made for and by native English speakers. If the students really are to be trained to take mainstream classes in English, it is important to use authentic materials, and not materials in English written specifically for a Japanese audience. Not only is the use of authentic materials an important aspect of their English education, it also provides the students access to texts that would not otherwise be available to them, and in this case, allows them to see how Japanese culture is taught to foreign students, which makes the exercise more interesting to them and enhances their motivation.

Each unit is introduced with a video in English, and for the first video, I supply a list of questions that must be answered by watching the video. Usually I show the video twice. The first time, I tell the students to just watch, and rather than worrying about understanding the English, instead try to garner as much information as possible by just using their eyes and deductive reasoning. For the second viewing, I supply the list of questions, which I dictate while having one student write them on the board and the rest of the students write along in their notebook, that way I can ascertain that they have the questions and spelling written down correctly. Supplying the students with questions to answer provides visual access to the words and phrases used in the video and further serves as a basic digest of the key points of the video. Reading the questions aloud, instead of just supplying a handout, gives the students a chance to hear the words and phrases in native-speaker pronunciation, but at a slower pace than the video. The dictation of questions is then followed by a repeat-after-me practice of any words or phrases that are particularly difficult. After the video is shown for a second time, selected students have to write the answers on the board. Since the students do not know in advance who will be asked to write the answers on the board, they are compelled to listen with all their attention. For the following videos presented periodically during the course, I again show the video twice, but for the second viewing, the students have to take notes on their own initiative using the previous exercise as an example. They are then given time for group work to compare and organize their notes, after which they have to write the key points of the video in English on the board.

4. CBI Lectures

After these initial classes covering the vocabulary, readings for an overview of the subject, practice for listening and taking notes, then the students should be adequately prepared for listening to a lecture presentation in English. The lectures cover the same basic material as presented in the readings and videos, but with more detail providing new and different information. For this one-semester course, I teach *ukiyo-e* for the first half of the semester and *kosode* (Edo period kimono) for the second half using PowerPoint presentations. PowerPoint (hereafter p.p.) or slides are necessary to teach a class using visual imagery, but in any case, I highly recommend using p.p. The students can deduct a great deal of information from the images used in the p.p. slides, and small amounts of added text help them follow the lecture. However, if too much text is supplied in the p.p. presentation, the students just write down the text verbatim without understanding it or attempting to listen to the lecture.

In addition, it is important to watch the students during the lecture to see when and where they have lost the thread of the discussion. Frequently, although they should have acquired the basic necessary vocabulary from the preparatory exercises, they are still not quite accustomed to apprehending the words orally. Vocabulary that they fail to catch needs to be repeated, and explained again in different words. If new terms are used in the lecture that are not in the (English) readings or vocabulary handouts, they need to be written on the board during the lecture and explained. Often, what would be called “false friends” in ESL classes for students of European abstract (for example, *embarazada* means pregnant in Spanish not embarrassed) can be meaningfully used to help Japanese students understand English terms they are not familiar with, and at the same time the students learn that these “loan words” are actually different from the terms used in English. Using an example that actually arose in class, when I realized my students did not understand “specially commissioned,” I rephrased it using the Japanese term “special-order,” which is written phonetically in the Japanese *katakana* script and transcribed in English as “*supesharu-ōdā*.”

As an additional benefit of teaching Japanese culture in English, the students have an opportunity to learn how to write Japanese words in English. For example, historical names are written in the Japanese word order of surname first such as Oda Nobunaga, words that are found in an English dictionary have been anglicized and adopted into the English language, and therefore do not need to be italicized as foreign words, such as “sushi” verses “*bakufu*” (military government). The typical Hepburn-based system of romanizing Japanese words into English is also significantly different from how Japanese students would intuitively do it based on the

method of inputting Japanese words into characters using roman letters on a computer. For example, a Japanese student would typically write “Syaraku Tousyuusai,” whereas this famous print artist’s name would be romanized as “Tōshūsai Sharaku” in English. I have found that my students are generally grateful to be taught how Japanese words are romanized in English and once having been taught eagerly use the Hepburn-based system because they do not wish to appear ignorant about how Japanese terms are used internationally. Learning how to write Japanese words in English does strike me as another aspect of English education that should really be taught as part of the secondary English education required in Japanese schools.

5. Testing and Evaluation

Generally after three or four lectures on the core subject has been taught, the material has been covered sufficiently and it is time for a mid-term exam. Of course an exam compels the students to review and study the material, and it also gives them a chance to actively produce what they had been fairly passively learning up until then. This is true of any course, but in the case of a CBI course, actively answering questions and writing short essays in English during an exam situation forces the students to push the envelope of their foreign language ability, as well as their overall cognitive skills in the case of a well constructed exam. Care has to be taken to make the exam difficult enough that it is a challenge, so that the students feel that their study and the preparation for the exam has been meaningful and their accomplishments rewarded. On the other hand, if the exam is too difficult the students may feel they have been confronted with the impossible and become so discouraged and despondent that they lose their motivation to learn a foreign language.

For that reason, it is important to explain clearly before the exam what the format will be and the range of material they will need to study to successfully perform on the exam. For this course, the mid-term exam has three sections and the students must answer the questions without the help of notes or dictionaries. For the first section, the students have to define in English terms selected from their handouts, as they had been doing all along in class, but this time from memory.

The second section has two short comparison questions for each of which the students have to compare and contrast two images previously listed on their handouts, discussed in class, and found in their readings. I have found that this concept of “compare-and-contrast” typical in American universities is new to my Japanese students and without proper preparation they are confounded by it. In the classes previous to the exam, I have them practice listing the points in

common and the differences between two different images. Once they get used to the concept, they seem to regard it as a kind of puzzle and enjoy doing it. The problem I have then found is they start to look for more complicated issues than is really necessary and then become exasperated when they can not explain it in English. To prevent them from becoming disenfranchised, it is important to work with the students and supply feed back to encourage them and help them in expanding their ability to express their thoughts in English.

The final section of the exam is an image not on the handouts or in the readings, but by an artist they have studied in class. They have to guess who the artist is and explain why they think so. I assure the students that a good explanation is more important than the right answer and suggest that it often helps if they list the major characteristic of the style first before trying to guess the artist. Not only is the final question an excellent exercise to get the students to apply the knowledge they have acquired in class, it also encourages critical thinking beyond mere language acquisition. When possible, I choose an image not covered in the class, but that they had an opportunity to see when I took them to a museum for field study. The students are usually gratified to find they have acquired the ability to explain something outside the boundaries of the class material.

6. Practical Application

Prior to the mid-term exam, typically the weekend before, I take the students to the Tokyo National Museum to see examples of *ukiyo-e* art discussed in class and kimono garments that will be the subject of the second half of the course. Seeing the real objects engenders a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of the students, and of course the real objects cannot be fully appreciated just from seeing images in the readings and slides. After having the students go through the gallery and explaining the details of the objects that cannot not readily be seen from the images in class, the students then have to select a kimono depicted in an *ukiyo-e* print for the topic of their term paper or class presentation. The students have to photograph the print they have chosen (allowed in this museum as long as flash is not used) and make sketches and notes of the details that they will then research as the second half of the course progresses. Through this practical application of the course content, the students are able to see what they have spent so much time and effort studying in class, and they then find that they are able to apply what they learned in class to understanding the real objects before them. In addition, practical application enthuses the students for studying for the exam and incurs their interest for the second half of the course.

7. From Passive to Active Learning

The adjunct academic skills taught in the first half of this CBI course are learning how to make an outline, take notes, and study for an exam in English, and in the second half the skills are learning how to do basic research and prepare for writing a term paper or making an oral presentation. The basic format for teaching the second half of this course is the same as the first half, supplying vocabulary handouts, having the students make an outline in Japanese and English first of a Japanese text and then an English one, presenting the material in class first using a video, before starting with the lectures on the core subject in English.

However, in the second half of the course the students are required to take a more active role in their learning. As they follow along with the lectures on Edo period kimono, they need to apply the new information they are acquiring to the subject of their term-paper or presentation by continually adding notes specific to the materials they prepared at the museum. Based on the exercises in note-taking and making an outline learned in the first half of the semester, they have to research the style, composition, technique, and design of the kimono in the print they have chosen.

For the students to successfully prepare for their research paper or presentation, I supply a short bibliography of both English and Japanese texts likely to be helpful for their project. I encourage them to read some of each language so that they adequately understand the material from reading in Japanese and acquire the necessary vocabulary and idioms from the English sources to help them write about it in English. In addition to supplying a base bibliography for their research, I review the bibliography with them discussing the proper academic format for making a bibliography in English, for both English and Japanese language sources. In addition to learning how to make a bibliography, the students also have to be instructed in how to make footnotes or endnotes.

Plagiarism is an issue that tends not to be actively addressed in Japanese universities, so it is necessary to explain the problems of plagiarism. This issue is more readily understandable to the students if it is explained that they are stealing someone else's ideas unless they cite the source. Also, it helps if responsible use of the internet is taught, both how to judge the quality of the online sources and the proper citation format for internet sources, as well as the perils of using online instant translation services such as Babel Fish instead of doing one's own work and using one's own words. It must be emphasized to the students that if they copy off the internet (or other sources for that matter) or use instant-translation, it will be readily discovered by a native English language instructor, and they will be given a grade of incomplete for having failed

to complete their work as required by the class.

Finally, before they write their term paper, I have the students make a detailed outline of what they intend to discuss. I then review their outline and make suggestions. The outline helps the students organize their thoughts before attempting to write a research paper in English, and assures a higher quality finished product. The more effort applied by the instructor in preparing the students for producing a term paper or oral presentation, the better the finished product will be, making it easier to grade and a less exasperating experience for the instructor as well as the student.

If the final project is to be an oral presentation instead of a term research paper, the students need to be taught how to make a p.p. presentation by taking them to a computer room and leading them through the process. In addition, during the course of the second half of the semester, aspects of organizing an overall p.p. presentation and the details of what kind of information and how much is used for an individual p.p. slide should be pointed out occasionally as the lecture is in process so that the students can learn from example. Likewise in the case of an oral presentation, the students need to make an outline of their topic and then write a text to draw on for making their presentation. Unless one is willing to just have the students read off their text, they next need to be taught how to make notes on index cards so they can make their presentation in a semi-extemporary style while addressing and making eye-contact with the audience.

The practical benefits of requiring a research term report or oral presentation, which will extend beyond the confines of the course, are several. Since most undergraduate courses taught abroad require a term paper, and seminars require the ability to make a presentation, practice in a CBI course well help prepare them for mainstream courses if they become an exchange student. The skills necessary to write a research term paper or oral presentation in English are equally useful and can be effectively applied to the students' mainstream classes in their native language. Furthermore, an exchange student is likely to be asked to make a presentation on a Japanese cultural topic, and basic presentation skills and the ability to make a p.p. presentation will be valuable at the workplace in the future.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties involved, it is possible to teach a meaningful CBI course successfully in Japan. However, it must be kept in mind that basic academic skills need to be

taught in tandem with the core subject material of the CBI course. I am not advocating that a course on “Introducing Japanese Culture in English” is the most appropriate subject for a CBI course taught in Japan, rather that the methodology laid out here in this essay for teaching a CBI course in Japan can be fruitfully applied to any subject. The primary considerations for the teaching of a CBI course are ensuring that the students are properly prepared for listening to a lecture in English, using authentic materials, employing an instructor knowledgeable in the subject, providing appropriate feedback and evaluation (testing) to improve the students’ proficiency, supplying opportunities for practical application of the new information acquired, allowing the students to elect courses of their choice of subject, and limiting the class enrollment to no more than twenty-five students. Although the prior ESL instruction that Japanese students have received in their secondary education is generally unsuitable to the needs of a CBI course, making such a course a challenge to teach, nevertheless when care is taken to teach adjunct skills and comprehension strategies, CBI courses can be usefully applied even in the case of Japan for improving the students’ proficiency in English. However, a CBI course should not be thought of as a magic pill for instant improvement of foreign language proficiency, but rather it requires demanding effort on the part of both the instructor and the student.

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