

Developing Linguistic Skills through Content-Based Learning

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Abstract

This study's objective was to assess university students' attitudes to a content-based learning curriculum. The writer examines if students can enjoy studying various contents in English and if at the same time students perceive they are able to improve their speaking and other linguistic skills. Furthermore, this paper probes if content-based learning can spur students to be more enthusiastic to continue learning English. Both qualitative and quantitative means were used to accumulate data. Results show that the majority of students enjoy content-based learning and that it had enhanced their enthusiasm to continue studying English. This study's conclusions indicate that students believe they can simultaneously develop their English language skills, especially speaking and listening while studying a content-based learning curriculum.

Key words: content-based learning, curriculum, linguistic skills, enthusiasm

Introduction

In 2010, the full-time faculty professors in the Global Media Studies (GMS) Department at Komazawa University revised the curriculum by eliminating some of the required courses and replacing them with new oral communication classes. Also, several content-based learning courses were added as electives for upper year students. For the content-based learning classes, the GMS professors devised a Regional Studies curriculum consisting of four components: "Integrated English I (IE I) was to concentrate on events in Asia and Oceania. IE II focused on the Americas. IE III examined Europe and Russia, while IE IV honed in on Africa and the Middle East. The primary aim of this curriculum was to build knowledge of and interest in a particular region of the world through an analysis of the way the region is represented in the media. Students were also expected to gain experience making effective presentations, learn the skills required to fully participate in and lead discussions, and develop English language proficiency in the four basic skills, especially speaking.

I was assigned the task of teaching and developing the curriculum for the spring term IE I and the fall IE II class. The IE I curriculum was divided into three sections: conflict and security, poverty and wealth gap, and human rights. The conflict and security component dealt primarily with issues involving Japan. These topics included the American bases in Okinawa, Japan's conflicts over Takeshima Island with South Korea and its dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands. Poverty and wealth gap examined child labor in the Philippines, sweat shops in Bangladesh and human trafficking in Asia. The final human rights section explained the tribulations of Aung San Suu Kyi and also discussed media censorship in China.

The IE II curriculum was divided by geographical area. The first weeks examined issues in North America such as illegal immigration in the United States and linguistic tensions in Canada's province of Quebec. The focus then shifted to the Caribbean where America's warming relations with Cuba were discussed. Lastly, the final section presented Brazil's 'Shanty Towns' and the Columbian government's peace negotiations with FARC.

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The aim of this paper is to assess the students' attitudes to content-based learning. It examines if students can enjoy studying various content in English and at the same time determine whether they perceive they are able to improve their speaking and other linguistic skills while studying a content-based curriculum. Also, this paper will probe if content-based learning can spur students to be more enthusiastic to continue learning English.

Content-Based Instruction

A content-based curriculum is one that teaches students about the world (Brinton, 1989). Proponents of content-based instruction argue that language is most effectively learned in the context of relevant and meaningful content. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) define content-based instruction (CBI) as "the integration of particular content with language-teaching aims" (p.2). The activities in a CBI class are centred around the content being taught and students are expected to learn the content by using the target language. According to Eskey, (1997) the rationale for employing CBI is that "people do not learn language and then use it, but that people learn languages by using them" (p. 133). Eskey argues that content is "not merely something to practice language with: rather, language is something to explore content with" (p. 136). Da Silva (2000) identifies content as a crucial part of language learning and the separation of language from content as both arbitrary and artificial.

Parmenter (2000) also links affective aspects to content-based learning such as enjoyment, confidence and increased motivation. However, Parmenter admits that the link between enjoyment and CBI is not automatic or can be combined with frustration as students realize the limitations of their language skills. Some students expressed frustration during discussions in the IE I and IE II classes when they were not able to adequately express their opinions in English. Students may grasp the content but have difficulty putting their thoughts into English and communicating their ideas. However, it is important for students to persevere and most students found that as the term progressed, they were able to discuss ideas in English more confidently and fluently. I also allowed for some judicious use of Japanese during discussions to reduce any frustration or anxiety students were feeling.

Class format

Class sizes for IE I and IE II were usually between 25 and 30 students. The IE I class in the spring of 2016 had the maximum 30 students while IE II that fall consisted of 26 members. The class met twice weekly and each session was 90 minutes. Students ranged from second year to seniors in their fourth year. Six students studied in both IE I and IE II. Otherwise, the class rosters were different students.

Each topic was introduced with a newspaper article. Students were assigned the article to read as homework prior to that class. Then at the class students were chosen randomly to read aloud paragraphs from the article and the teacher checked students' pronunciation and knowledge of new vocabulary. Students were presented with comprehension questions to check their understanding of the article's contents. Sometimes the teacher would utilize short video clips from Youtube to enhance learning through another medium. In the next class the students would be given a short reading cloze activity related to the same newspaper article. This would be followed by a vocabulary matching exercise. Then the class would be divided into groups of three or four students for approximately 45 minutes of discussion. Each group had an assigned discussion leader who was chosen in advance of the class. The discussion leader prepared a one page report of the newspaper article read at the last class. This report included a one paragraph summary of the article and a paragraph providing the leader's opinion of the article and or topic. The leader would also teach or check students' understanding of five vocabulary words chosen from the newspaper article. Lastly, the leader would

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prepare four questions for the group discussion. The teacher acted as facilitator during this process answering any questions students had and providing judicious error correction. This process repeated itself with the introduction of each new topic in the curriculum in the following weeks. Students maintained a vocabulary notebook during the course in which they were expected to compile a list of 100 new words. As well as adding the words, students had to include a definition in English and write their own original sentence for each word. Most of the words students entered in their notebooks were words studied in the newspaper articles, however, students were permitted to add words from other sources as well. In the final two classes, students did small group presentations after having researched a topic of their choosing related to the themes studied in class. Students used visual aids and proposed solutions to the problem which their particular group had researched.

Curriculum Design

Content must be chosen judiciously because “it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know in class” (Nunan, 1988, p.3). For a 15 week syllabus, there was a wealth of possible topics to consider for studying. When choosing topics the teacher considered their immediacy as well as conjecturing student knowledge and interest. A content-based curriculum tries to strike a balance between imparting substantial content and encouraging linguistic development. Poole & McCasland (2000) for example claim the ideal balance is 20 percent language instruction and 80 percent content instruction. When asking students to confer in pairs or in small groups, target language was provided on the black board. This target language was essential for aiding students to converse in English and from discouraging a relapse into Japanese.

Teachers can use realia and authentic text materials to increase student interest and motivation (Brinton, 1989, Hosoya, 2000, O’Dowd, 2000). However, authentic materials sometimes need to be altered to bring a course to students’ ability level because as Sato (2000) warns, most students are likely to be overwhelmed by vocabulary because the words are so unfamiliar to students. However, according to Kasper (1997), as students grapple with authentic text, they become aware of how to construct meaning from information stored in memory, and filter out redundant or irrelevant information. Rosengren (1983) suggests the most effective materials are ones teachers design themselves. Teachers can tailor materials to meet the interests and needs of their students. Most of the material presented in both the IE I and II classes were newspaper articles extracted from English newspapers printed in Japan. Occasionally, if an article was deemed overly long or too difficult for the students’ level, the teacher presented a shortened summary of the article. This of course is a time consuming process which can be taxing for part-time teachers who often teach a substantial number of classes.

Student feedback

In June of the spring term I asked the students to answer the bi-annual anonymous questionnaire administered by the university. Students were to complete the questionnaire in class on their phones. Of the 30 students enrolled in the class, 16 answered the questionnaire on the assigned day. The other students were either absent that day or neglected to comply. Asked on the questionnaire why they had chosen to take the IE I elective class, 12 respondents (75%) checked the answer that “I was interested in the contents of the lesson when I saw the syllabus.” 82% of the respondents said they were enthusiastic about the class. Only one student answered negatively. The majority (88%) said they understood the contents well while the other two students were neutral in their responses. The students almost answered unanimously (94%) that the handouts were effective in understanding the content of the lessons. When asked if they were interested in the content, 13 students (82%) said yes. The other three students were neutral with none answering negatively.

Pleased with the feedback from the spring IE I class, especially regarding student interest and enthusiasm

for the content, I designed a questionnaire combining both qualitative and quantitative features (see Appendix) to determine if my IE II students perceived they were making progress with their English linguistic skills while studying a content-based curriculum. I administered the questionnaires to the 18 students who were in attendance at the final class of the fall term. The students completed the questionnaire during class time. The questionnaire was written in both English and Japanese to ensure full comprehension. The questionnaire was multi-faceted, consisting of a type of Likert-scale questions with both open and closed-responses. Students were told they had a choice of answering questions in either English or Japanese. All students answered the open ended questions in English. The Likert-like scale asked students to consider to what extent the IE II class had made them enthusiastic to continue studying English. Then students were asked to circle the language skill they had hoped would improve the most during the term and I had them rank the four skills in order of how they perceived each skill to have actually improved. I also asked the students to gauge to what degree each of their four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing had improved since studying in the IE class. The students had six choices: *not sure*, *very little*, *a little*, *some*, *much* and *very much*. The final question asked students what they liked and disliked about studying in the IE II class.

Findings

Results of the questionnaire clearly show that the majority of students felt the content-based instruction had made them more enthusiastic to continue studying English. Of the 18 students surveyed, 16 (88%) said studying in IE II had raised their enthusiasm either a lot or very much to continue studying English. Only one student said their enthusiasm had only increased a little and the other student answered they were not sure. According to the questionnaire 15 students (83%) said speaking was the language skill they had hoped would improve the most while studying in the class. However, the results showed that only seven students actually believed speaking was the linguistic skill they thought had improved the most since the course began. The same number of students said they believed their listening was the most improved. Interestingly, only one student felt their reading skill had progressed the most despite consuming copious new articles in class. Students' written comments echoed their sentiments that the content-based learning had contributed to linguistic improvements. Student A wrote, "We can express our opinion in the group work and I think it'd be good to improve our ability in English." Student B added, "I think this class is perfect to study English." A couple of other comments suggested that some students believed their knowledge had increased, too. Student C wrote that "The class was difficult but I could learn a lot of things," while student D believed that the benefit of the class was that "I could studied many American culture."

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed the issue of implementing a content-based learning curriculum at the university level, finding that not only do most students enjoy studying content but also that most perceive they are simultaneously developing their English language skills, especially their oral fluency and listening abilities. Results show that content-based learning also inspires students to want to continue studying English. Of course there are certain limits to listening to student opinions. Some students may reject content that is challenging to study in their second language. Also, students may not realize how much their language proficiency has actually improved over the course of study, especially when the pedagogic focus is on understanding and discussing ideas, rather than focusing primarily on communicating with grammatical accuracy. Nevertheless, student input is a valuable source of feedback and worthy of consideration when evaluating a curriculum's success.

Before teaching this class, I had hoped that students would perceive that their speaking skills had improved

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the most while studying its content. Oral fluency was the skill I had wanted to provide most opportunities for language practice and was the language skill the majority of students said they most desired to improve. Student feedback requires me to reflect on my teaching practice and consider if in fact I am providing sufficient opportunities for students to develop oral fluency in the classroom. Teaching the IE classes has given me a more acute understanding of English in foreign language education, of the value of content-oriented instruction and student engagement. Developing a new curriculum requires a tremendous amount of preparation and is an ongoing process. It has been challenging to try to maintain an appropriate balance between imparting substantial content and encouraging linguistic development. Nonetheless, students have responded very favorably to the new curriculum. They enjoy learning about various issues, particularly if language support is provided for the activities.

In the spring of 2017 the GMS curriculum will undergo significant revisions. As a result, the content-based IE classes will not be offered. However, there is a possibility that the IE classes could be reinstated at a future time. Should the IE classes be resurrected in the future, I would like to encourage some student action either collectively or individually. Collective action could consist of class projects to raise awareness of global issues or students volunteering their time for a worthy cause. Even simple actions such as giving to charity or writing a letter to an embassy can lead to positive changes, allow students to develop a greater social responsibility and assume a sense of control over their lives.

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Appendix – Questionnaire

December 21st, 2016

Integrated English Survey

1. To what extent have the Integrated English classes you have studied made you more enthusiastic to continue studying English? (please circle one number)

Integrated English の授業を受けて、もっと意欲的に英語の勉強を続けようと思うようになりましたか？

not sure	very little	a little	some	a lot	very much
0	1	2	3	4	5

2. Which of the four language skills did you hope would improve the most this year in the Integrated English classes? (please circle one)

今年度のIntegrated Englishの授業で、4技能のうちのどれを最も上達させたいと思っていましたか？（1つ選んで丸をして下さい）

writing	reading	listening	speaking
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3. Which of the four language skills do you think has improved the most since studying Integrated English? Please write one number (1, 2, 3, 4) beside each skill.

Integrated English を勉強して、4技能のうちのどれが最も上達したと思いますか？

それぞれの技能について、(1, 2, 3, 4) から1つずつ選んで数字を横に書いて下さい。

(1, 2, 3, 4) を1回ずつ使い、同じ数字を書かないようにして下さい。

Most improved				Least improved
1	2	3	4	
writing __	reading __	listening __	speaking __	

4. How much do you think your four language skills have improved since studying?

English through content based learningの授業の結果、以下の英語の4技能はどれくらい伸びたと思いますか？

		not sure	very little	a little	some	much	very much	
Language Skills	}	0	1	2	3	4	5	
		speaking	0	1	2	3	4	5
		listening	0	1	2	3	4	5
		reading	0	1	2	3	4	5
		writing	0	1	2	3	4	5

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5. Please complete the following 2 sentences.

次の2つの文を英語で完成させて下さい。ただし、日本語のほうがうまく表現できると思う場合には、用紙の裏面を使って日本語で書いても構いません。裏面には、5.と数字を振ってから文章を書いて下さい。

One thing I really enjoying about this Integrated English class was . . . _____

One thing I didn't like about this Integrated English class was . . . _____

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

ご協力ありがとうございました！

