Content-based Language Teaching
At Toyo University

Robert HUGHES*

Introduction

This article is the combined result of two seminars given at the Itakura Campus of Toyo University in late 2005. The first seminar introduced content-based language teaching, while the second seminar was a workshop in designing content-based language teaching materials. These two seminars were inspired by the idea that some of the specialized subjects in the Department of Regional Development Studies would be taught in English. Japanese subject specialists, on a voluntary basis, would begin teaching, in English, certain specialized subjects for the 2006 academic year. In other words, non-native speakers with varying degrees of proficiency in English would teach non-native English speaking students through the medium of English. This project has become known as “Eigo Ni Yoru Senmon Kammoku.”

Through discussion among faculty members, a plan emerged at Toyo University, Itakura campus to offer Regional Development Department students specialized subjects in English. This idea has considerable merit. Graduates of our program may well find themselves in need of strong English skills in future occupational or volunteer activities. The existing EFL curriculum does not guarantee a high level of English language proficiency. Additionally, not all students can afford to participate in the study abroad opportunities that exist for both short and long term English study programs abroad.

Concerns

Offering degree accredited classes in English is an effective way to increase the amount of English exposure that Japanese university students can get. However, it

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is not without a unique host of potential problems. The most significant of which is that non-native English speaking teachers will be teaching their subject specialties in English to primarily non-native English speaking students. In various discussions with colleagues, their despair and anxiety was very thinly veiled. There were several matters of concern. How would they be able to accomplish teaching their specialized subjects in a second language? Would their English language ability be sufficient? Would the students be able to understand the content? Would these lessons motivate the students or have just the opposite effect?

**A Practical Solution**

Teaching experience and educational theory have come together to support an approach in which language is effectively taught through the medium of subject matter. This approach has been called content-based language teaching. The target language is largely the vehicle through which subject matter content is learned rather than the focus of study. Important gains in language occur “incidentally,” as language is used in the understanding and expression of meaning. Thus, the traditional focus of both native and second language classes on awareness of linguistic form is subordinated to a focus on acquiring information through the second language. Focus on acquiring information through the second language is the cornerstone of immersion language programs (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 2003).

**Immersion Education**

Much experimentation has been done with content-based language instruction in Canada. A French immersion project was first undertaken in 1965 in St. Lambert, Quebec. By the mid 1980’s, “immersion” had become a mass educational movement where over 240,000 Canadian children received much or all of their school instruction through a second language. After several years of intensive exposure to the second language, immersion students achieved a high level of functional ability in the second language, with near native-like proficiency in receptive skills (listening and reading) according to Brinton, snow, and wesche (2003).

While their speaking and writing skills fell short of native speaker performance,
such students could achieve functional skills at a level far beyond what other second language instructional approaches had been able to produce in schools. Immersion is highly successful in developing advanced second language speakers who later on can perfect their skills through real life interactions with native speakers (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 2003).

“Practical experience with language teaching, systematic thought about language teaching and learning, and empirical research on classroom language learning all suggest that content learning through the medium of the target language can serve well as a major component of instructional programs for all age groups. It further suggests that such instruction is particularly appropriate where learners have specific functional needs in the second language. Classroom experience and second language acquisition theory both tell us that rich second language input in relevant contexts is the key, where the attention of the learner is focused mostly on the meaning rather than on the language (p.9 Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 2003).”

**Content-based Language Teaching**

Content-based instruction is the integration of particular content with language teaching aims. The focus for students is on acquiring information through the second language and in the process, developing academic language skills. Content-based language instruction combines language instruction with an academic subject: two matters which are usually kept separate in most educational settings.

At Toyo University, the situation will be slightly modified with the primary aim of teaching academic subject matter and concurrently, improving students’ second language proficiency. Contemporary thinking is that language is most effectively learned in context. However, contextualizing language lessons is not enough. The content-based approach emphasizes the use of authentic texts which are not written for language teaching but which are relevant to the learner's needs and purposes. Authentic texts are loaded with structures, functions, and discourse features. Focus on the informational content allows for incidental acquisition of these language features.

In a content-based approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Such an approach lends itself quite naturally to the teaching of the four traditional skills.
**Instructional Issues**

For successful language learning to occur, the language syllabus should take into account the eventual uses the learner will make of the target language. Use of relevant informational content is assumed to increase motivation in the language course and thus to promote more effective learning. Language should be taught through contextualized use rather than fragmented examples of correct sentence level usage.

Content-based approaches apply the pedagogical principle that any teaching should build on the previous experience of the learner, as they take into account the learners existing knowledge of the subject matter and of the academic environment as well as their second language knowledge.

Successful language acquisition requires understandable input in the target language. Since input in the target language must also contain new elements to be acquired, comprehension is accomplished with the help of cues from the situational and verbal contexts. These interact with the learner’s imperfect knowledge of the language, and with his or her world knowledge and expectations.

With authentic reading materials, students should not only understand the content but to interpret and evaluate it as well. Students should be involved in class discussions. Instructors should recognize that writing follows from listening and reading, and students should synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing.

An important implication is that the content dictates the selection and sequence of language items to be taught rather than vice versa. Teachers and students must view the content as the organizing feature. How much attention is placed on specific linguistic features or discrete point language teaching is a matter for each teacher to decide.

An example lesson could proceed with the topic initially presented as a reading selection, the topic and vocabulary could then be recycled into guided discussions, related audio and video materials could be the basis for listening input, and lastly, a writing assignment synthesizing the various source materials could round out the topical unit.

In theme-based courses, students can move to higher levels of language processing (such as comparative analysis or separating facts from opinions) through the
variety of text types, tasks, and activities to which they are exposed. The underlying assumption is that successful language learning occurs when students are presented with target language material in a meaningful, contextualized form with the primary focus on acquiring information.

The materials used are authentic in the sense that they were not originally produced for language teaching purposes. Teacher’s efforts thus go into adapting, supplementing, and developing materials for language teaching purposes and by providing students with strategies to assist them in comprehending the materials.

When students process the content, some degree of accommodation to second language learner needs occurs. The primary aim of theme-based model is to help students develop second language competence and that content learning occurs in the theme-based language course is an inherent feature of the model. In the case of Toyo University, the primary aim will be content learning with language study, an inherent feature.

Teacher Development

Success with a content-based teaching approach requires a fundamental shift in the attitude of the teacher from an explicit model of teaching to an implicit model of teaching. Non-native English speaking teachers can make up for any linguistic deficiencies by investing more time in the development of instructional tasks and materials.

Instructors have to be aware of how a lack of content familiarity may affect task performance or how inadequate second language skills may prevent students from demonstrating their content knowledge. Instructors must shift concern away from that of linguistic proficiency and instead they must concentrate on developing materials.

A Fundamental Shift to an Implicit Model of Teaching

Explicit (Skill Getting) to Implicit (Skill Using)
(teacher-centered lecture) (student-centered tasks)

The teacher needs to minimize lecture time and explanations and maximize student interaction through tasks. The tasks need to provide opportunities for
functional use of the language by the students. Let the tasks teach!

Organize the material and determine what information is of high importance in order to make tasks. The material should be authentic course material.

Vary in-class routines so that a short lecture burst of content is followed by a relevant task. Develop a repertoire of useful tasks that can be easily made.

Create meaningful tasks that require students to exchange information for task completion such as gap-fill exchanges, surveys, or student-made quizzes. Create short reading activities and listening activities.

**Specific Skills For Teaching**

The teacher will need to analyze student interaction and student language exchanges and determine the conditions that produce the best results. Additionally, the teacher will need to recognize the fundamental role of questions in student exchanges and note the impact on classroom discourse.

There will be a need to develop strategies to best exploit the content materials. There will be a need to use specific criteria when evaluating instructional material. Harmer’s 1991 criteria can prove invaluable.

**Criteria For Communicative Tasks (Harmer 1991)**

1) There must be a communicative purpose
2) Must create a desire to communicate
3) Emphasis must be on content not form
4) Use a variety of language
5) No teacher intervention
6) Students determine the language structures to be used

Professional teaching depends on critical analysis of one’s own teaching repertoire in the classroom and should include an analysis of student interaction and student exchanges. Students need opportunities to participate in real communicative exchanges.

Attention needs to be directed to the issue of student production of questions. Although there have been several studies addressing the issue of teacher questioning behavior, little research exists on student questioning behavior.

Teachers make great use of display questions. Display questions are used
when the answer is generally known and the student is merely displaying their language skill when asking and answering such questions. This type of discourse is rarely found outside the classroom.

Referential questions are those where the questioner does not know the answer and there is a genuine exchange of information. The focus is on what is said, not on how it is said. Referential questions refer to personal experiences, attitudes, opinions, etc. Referential questions often require an extended answer and draw on a wider range of linguistic resources. Listeners need to get involved and ask questions to check understanding to make input comprehensible. Referential questions emphasize meaning and fluency.

Research indicates that referential questions push learners to the limits of their competence and promote language acquisition while an over reliance on display questions limits student production and maintains emphasis on form and accuracy.

Additionally, teachers should gain familiarity with Bloom’s Taxonomy of Questions (1956). Bloom’s taxonomy is a useful chart for reference to high order information processing such as comprehension, analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation. Questioning plays a very important role in any classroom. The first step in effective questioning is recognizing that questions have distinct characteristics. The six levels of questioning in Bloom’s taxonomy require the respondent to use different thought processes. In order to engage students in a variety of thought processes, teachers need to be able to formulate questions and plan tasks that correspond to all six levels.

**Summary Chart Of Question Types In Bloom's Taxonomy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Student Activity</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Giving descriptions Stating main ideas Comparing</td>
<td>Describe (what happened) What is the main idea? How are these alike?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Applying techniques and rules To solve problems that have a single correct answer.</td>
<td>If he has x, how many can he buy? What is the latitude of Moscow? Classify these into groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Identifying motives or causes. Making inferences. Finding evidence to support generalizations</td>
<td>Why did he do it? What can we conclude? What does this tell us? What evidence supports this?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creating Tasks With Informational Content

Generally, authentic content texts provide a density of information which is difficult for the non-native speaker to process. Adaptation, when necessary, should involve making the text more accessible through the development of exercises to help learners utilizing existing schemata and by the preparation of learning crutches such as information grids, charts, and graphic organizers.

With material adaptation, a serious issue is that any form of adaptation to a text violates “authenticity.” If the end objective is to have our students read unsimplified materials then we must be wary of simplifying the content or linguistic characteristics of the original text. However, when using authentic materials with lower proficiency students adaptation may be necessary.

In fact, in many cases it would be quite unfair to use unadapted texts because the instructional situation may not provide the full linguistic, situational, and experiential content which would be there in real life. Most importantly, is the fact that less proficient second language speakers cannot deal with original academic texts. By being selective regarding texts, the teacher can deliver manageable amounts of authentic materials and provide a rich variety of tasks that help give students access to the meaning. This is really the key to helping the students.

Task Types

1) Dictations: These are good tests of grammatical knowledge
2) Proofreading: Take a passage and put in errors, during the course of the lecture, the students have to locate and correct the errors
3) Readings: Create tasks that require skimming and scanning: Skimming is to read quickly for the main idea or most important point while scanning is to read to find specific information. See Appendices A, B
4) Dicto-comp: It is a kind of delayed dictation. The text is read to the students but they are not allowed to write anything until after the text is finished. Then the goal is to reconstruct the text as accurately as possible
5) Grammar exercises such as combining sentences with relative clauses
6) Completing lecture texts or notes: give an incomplete set of notes and have the students listen to the lecture and complete the missing information like cloze exercises. See Appendix G
7) Error analysis: Provide text with errors and have students identify the errors. The errors could be either content or grammatical.
8) Interviews: Students work in pairs to determine what their partner knows about a topic. See Appendix D
8) Information gap activities: Students have different information which when exchanged completes a text or a task. See Appendices E, F
9) Guessing vocabulary from context: fill-in-the blank type exercises.
10) Scrambled texts: Take important paragraphs and scramble the sentences to then have the students reassemble. See Appendix C

Conclusion

The ideas presented in this article, if adopted by my non-native English speaking colleagues should make it possible for them to gain the confidence necessary to tackle the challenge of offering instruction in English.

Reference
Brinton, D. (1993) Content-based Instruction and English For Specific Purposes, Same or Different? TESOL Matters, August/September
Appendix A

Task 1 Timed Reading

Content-Based Teaching And
Immersion Education
(Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 2003)

Follow your teacher’s instructions. Fold the paper down the center. Then read the paragraph. Turn the paper over and answer the questions. Read the paragraph a second time. Answer the questions again. Open the paper up and check the answers to the questions. Record your answers.

“Practical experience and theory have come together to generate current interest in the theory that language can be effectively taught through the medium of subject matter. The target language is largely the vehicle through which subject matter content is learned rather than the focus of study. Important gains in language occur “incidentally,” as language is used in the understanding and expression of meaning. Thus, the traditional focus of both native and second language classes on awareness of linguistic form is subordinated to a focus on acquiring information through the second language. Focus on acquiring information through the second language is the cornerstone of immersion language programs (p.5).”

1) According to current theory, what can be taught through subject content?
   a) practical experience
   b) language
   c) current interest

2) The target language serves as
   a) the focus of study
   b) the means to study
   c) the subject content

3) When language is used for the understanding and expression of meaning, language learning occurs
   a) incidentally
   b) accidentally
   c) formally

4) Focus on linguistic form
   a) is more important than acquiring information
   b) is less important than acquiring information
   c) has the same importance as acquiring information
Appendix B

Task 2 Timed Reading

Content-Based Second Language Teaching

Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (2003) define content-based language teaching “as the integration of particular content with language teaching aims. More specifically, in post-secondary education, it is the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills. The focus for students is on acquiring information through the second language and in the process they develop their academic language skills. The goal is to enable students to transfer these skills to other academic courses given in their second language. In both purpose and practice, content-based language teaching tries to eliminate the artificial separation between language instruction and content subject classes that is found in most colleges (p.2).”

1. Content-based language teaching relies on:
   a) a separation of grammar and content
   b) an integration of second language skill and content
   c) an integration of academic skill and language skill
   d) a separation of language instruction and content

2. The word “concurrent” as it is used in the reading is best defined as:
   a) fast
   b) electrical
   c) at the same time
   d) independent

3. How will students develop their academic language skills?
   a) By separating language instruction and course content
   b) By transferring their content to other courses
   c) By memorizing vocabulary lists
   d) By acquiring information through the second language

4. The goal of content-based language teaching is to enable students
   a) to transfer their academic language skills to other subjects
   b) to understand their purpose and practice
   c) to focus only on language instruction
   d) to acquire information
Appendix C

Task 3 Scrambled Text

(Text from Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 2003, p. 4)

Rearrange the following sentences into a meaningful paragraph.

1) Here, communicative language teaching and needs-related, content-based instruction merge in their respective objectives.
2) It was also considered the key to foreign literatures and cultures for the educated classes.
3) However, approaches which advocate language learning for communicative purposes through meaningful language use have become influential in situations where the language to be learned is a second language with clear functional utility for the learner.
4) Such attitudes still persist in many foreign language-learning situations in schools and universities.
5) The situation in which learners need to improve their second language skills for purposes of university study unites formal second language instruction with real and functional needs.
6) Language study in school was long considered to be training in mental discipline.

Key (Original text)

“Language study in school was long considered to be training in mental discipline. It was also considered the key to foreign literatures and cultures for the educated classes. Such attitudes still persist in many foreign language-learning situations in schools and universities. However, approaches which advocate language learning for communicative purposes through meaningful language use have become influential in situations where the language to be learned is a second language with clear functional utility for the learner. The situation in which learners need to improve their second language skills for purposes of university study unites formal second language instruction with real and functional needs. Here, communicative language teaching and needs-related, content-based instruction merge in their respective objectives (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 2003, p.4).”
Appendix D
Task 3 True or False Pairwork
Content-Based Teaching And Immersion Education
(Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 2003, p.5)

Read the paragraph!
“Practical experience and theory have come together to generate current interest in the theory that language can be effectively taught through the medium of subject matter. The target language is largely the vehicle through which subject matter content is learned rather than the focus of study. Important gains in language occur “incidentally,” as language is used in the understanding and expression of meaning. Thus, the traditional focus of both native and second language classes on awareness of linguistic form is subordinated to a focus on acquiring information through the second language. Focus on acquiring information through the second language is the cornerstone of immersion language programs (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 2003, p.5).”

For each sentence above, write a true or false statement to test another student!

1) ___________________________________________________________________________________ true /false

2) ___________________________________________________________________________________ true /false

3) ___________________________________________________________________________________ true /false

4) ___________________________________________________________________________________ true /false

5) ___________________________________________________________________________________ true /false
Appendix E

Task 5 Information Gap

Immersion Education

Pairwork Student A

Get the missing information from a partner! Use the question word hint to help focus your question! Don’t say the information in parenthesis until your partner asks for it!

• __________ has been done with content-based language instruction (in Canada). Hint: what

• In Canada, a French immersion project was first undertaken in __________ (in St. Lambert, Quebec). Hint: when

• By the mid 1980’s, (immersion) had become a mass educational movement where over _______ ______ Canadian children received much or all of their school instruction through a second language. Hint: how many

• After several years of intensive exposure to the second language, immersion students achieved _______ ______ ability in the second language, with near native-like proficiency in the receptive skills of (listening and reading). Hint: what

• While their ____________ skills fell short of native speaker performance, such students could achieve (functional skills) at a level far beyond what other second language instructional approaches had been able to produce in schools. Hint: which

• is highly successful in developing advanced second language speakers who later on can perfect their skills (through real life interactions with native speakers). Hint: what
Appendix F

Task 5  Information Gap

Immerssion Education

Pairwork Student B

Get the missing information from a partner! Use the question word hint to help focus your question! Don’t say the information in parenthesis until your partner asks for it!

● (Much experimentation) has been done with content-based language instruction in _________.
  Hint: where

● A French immersion project was first undertaken (in 1965) in _________. Hint: where

● By the mid 1980’s, _________ had become a mass educational movement where over (240, 000) Canadian children received much or all of their school instruction through a second language.
  Hint: what

● After several years of intensive exposure to the second language, immersion students achieved (a high level of functional) ability in the second language, with near native-like proficiency in the receptive skills of _________. Hint: what

● While their (speaking and writing) skills fell short of native speaker performance, such students could achieve _________ skills at a level far beyond what other second language instructional approaches had been able to produce in schools. Hint: what kind

● (Immersion) is highly successful in developing advanced second language speakers who later on can perfect their skills ______________________________. Hint: how
## Appendix G

### Summary Chart Of Question Types In Bloom’s Taxonomy

**Question types:**

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</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Recalling definitions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Giving descriptions</td>
<td>Describe (what happened)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stating main ideas</td>
<td>What is the main idea?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparing</td>
<td>How are these alike?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Applying techniques and rules</td>
<td>If he has x, how many can he buy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>To solve problems that have a single correct answer.</td>
<td>What is the latitude of Moscow?  Classify these into groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Identifying motives or causes.</td>
<td>Why did he do it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making inferences.</td>
<td>What can we conclude?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding evidence to support generalizations.</td>
<td>What does this tell us?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What evidence supports this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solving Problems</td>
<td>Can you give it a title?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making Predictions</td>
<td>How can we solve the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Original communications</td>
<td>How can we improve this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What will happen now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What do you think would happen if . . . ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving opinions about issues</td>
<td>Do you agree with. . . ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judging the validity of ideas</td>
<td>Do you believe that. . . ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judging the merits of solutions</td>
<td>Do you think it right that. . . ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judging the quality of art, etc.</td>
<td>What is your opinion. . . ?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Would it be better if . . . ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Which do you agree with?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>