Content-based Language Learning through English and the Internet

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Abstract

This paper investigates the *English and the Internet* course, a course based on academic content. A brief explanation of content-based syllabuses and language learning theory is given followed by a description of the class including an outline of the course. An analysis of the course details the language used in the classroom and the activities of the students during a typical hour of class. Feedback from students and the instructor's impression are also given. The paper concludes that while immersion style instruction is difficult for some students, many enjoyed the class and were able to work if not comfortably at least satisfactorily in an English language environment after an initial period of adjustment.

1.0 Introduction

Learning a language through a syllabus based on academic content (as opposed to one based merely on linguistic or even communicative objectives) offers students an extraordinary educational opportunity since it provides such a rich learning environment. Although it is usually unadvisable to do two things at the same time, in the case of language learning it is perhaps sometimes *best*. In this case study, students learn English while using the computer for research and writing. The wealth of information on the Internet provides students with a real incentive for both intensive and extensive reading as they search for information on a variety of topics. At times, they have to translate from one language to the other, and since the instruction is conducted in English, they must also use the language to communicate verbally when consulting with the instructor about their writing projects.

1.1 Purpose and Methodology

This study is an attempt to give as complete a description of the *English and the Internet* course as possible and point out its strengths and weaknesses while giving a rationale for this method of language instruction and arguing for its validity and effectiveness. A brief survey of

content-based language learning including curriculum design and language learning theory is given followed by a description of the *English and the Internet* course. For this case study, data was collected using several methods including the instructor's class notes, interviews with students and informal surveys. The instructor of this course relied on class notes made for each lecture and a teaching journal to record observations about the class. Students were interviewed during and after the course to gauge their reaction to and get their opinions about the curriculum and teaching methodology.

2.0 Background

Courses in English for academic purposes such as the *English and the Internet* are based on well-founded educational principles. The simplicity and elegance of design and the effectiveness of learning make it a logical choice for university languages courses.

2.1 Syllabus design

Nunan (1989, p. 125) defines content-based syllabuses by explaining that "[m]any of the courses and textbooks for English for Specific Purposes take as their point of departure content or topics from other subject areas. Another example of content-based courses are the foreign language 'immersion' programmes in which school students learn maths, science, history etc. through the target language. (In a sense, as language is used as a vehicle to talk about other things, all language classes have a content dimension.)" While content-based language learning courses are quite common in the ESL programs of countries where English is the native language it is often used as a supplement or in some cases as an alternative to traditional language programs in places where English is normally taught as a foreign language. One excellent example is the English immersion program at Katoh Gakuen in Numazu, Shizuoka, which teaches the Mombusho curriculum in English[1]. Another example of a content-based course is the ESP language program at Mitsui Chemicals, which prepares chemical plant operators for overseas assignments[2].

More apropos to language courses at universities, however, is as Nunan (1989, p. 58) notes the suggestion by Widdowson "for those language programs whose goals relate to the development of academic skills, or which are preparing learners for further study, it has been suggested that texts can be taken from subject areas in the school curriculum." For *English and the Internet,* a course in information science has been adapted for teaching language skills while instructing students in

the use of computers for word processing and research. It is a course in academic writing, which includes hands on practice using the computer for word processing and Internet research. Since the Internet provides a wealth of information in English, it is only natural that a class teaching students how to do research with the Internet becomes part of an English course.

However, Nunan (1988 p. 45.) points out that one of the criticisms of needs based courses is the fear that the language learnt will be "non-generative." That is, it will not be generalized to other contexts. He (Ibid.) continues to argue, however, that a course based on content, content that the students find useful, will be of more interest to them and therefore they will be more likely to learn. Certainly in the case of *English and the Internet*, students are learning what will be an important part of their university work-research writing-and for many the Internet is an irresistible source of information and entertainment. Furthermore, the methodology of the course, as described below, is quite different from the "phrase book" language learning of many typical ESP courses.

Of course, it cannot be said whether this is enough to insure that students will learn or not, but it does provide a language rich learning environment which also allows students to see the importance of English and the value of mastering it for this essential academic skill of research and writing. Although it has been shown futile to compare methods (see for example Nunan 1992, p. 92-92) the concept of language learning upon which content-based syllabuses are based is undeniably attractive.

2.2 Language Learning Theory

One popular idea for language learning is the communicative approach in which students learn language by using it for communication. The *English and the Internet* course provides students with the opportunity to use English, but language learning is not explicit nor is language the focus of the course. Rather, it is the medium of instruction and students pick up the language from its use in the classroom.

White (1988, p. 91) notes, however that "SLA research has, as yet, had little impact on content syllabuses, although it is clear that the concept of a natural order of acquisition must be taken into account." But White is referring to syllabuses that start with English as the subject to be taught. Here, we are looking at a set of discrete skills to be taught--how to use the computer and to write research reports with them--through English with focus on manipulating the computer rather than

the language. Language learning, therefore, takes place implicitly rather than explicitly, much more like Krashen's concept of natural language learning.

Krashen and Terrell (see Richards and Rodgers 1986, chapter 9) have claimed that languages are learned by using them for communication. While this may be an extreme statement of communicative language learning, the distinction that is made in communicative language learning theory between language learning and language acquisition is useful. The former occurs when language structures are taught explicitly, the latter when languages are picked up through interaction or when using the language for communication. Without going into detail or arguing for one or the other, in the *English and the Internet* course examples of both kinds of learning can be found. The instructor uses English to explain to students how to use the computer, how to organize and write reports, etc. In some cases, students learn by doing and through repetition much like in Asher's Total Physical Response method (see Richards and Rodgers 1986, chapter 6) while the teacher can easily check for understanding by observing student behavior. In other cases, definitions must be given and the meaning explained as in more common methods of language instruction. Furthermore, when students actually write their reports, grammar and vocabulary are discussed providing opportunities for explicit language learning as well. But here again, even the grammar explanation is given in English allowing for even more, intensive language practice and much of this is done one on one.

Basing the syllabus on content rather than the language itself means that the course is organized differently. Instead of vocabulary, grammar or even language functions, the course is organized, in this case, around steps needed for manipulating a computer and the process of writing as the following description of the course including its content-based syllabus shows.

2.3 The Course

English and the Internet is a required course that teaches first year students how to use computers for word processing and do research with them. The Course Guide Book for *English and the Internet* divides the course into three parts: Computer and English, Project Work, and Paragraph Patterns. Each part is broken down into lessons and units, and in the first part, each lesson consists of a unit about the computer and a unit about composition. In the first semester, students learn basic word processing and write a self-introduction, which is then published by uploading it onto the classes' webpage. In the second semester, students learn how to find

information on the Internet and use this skill for a writing project. The writing project is also uploaded onto the webpage.

The instructor of the three sections of English for the Internet observed for this study is a native speaker of English from the American mid-west who has taught English in Japan for over 15 years and has a master's degree in applied linguistics from a university in England. Although the instructor is fluent in Japanese, English is used almost exclusively in class.

2.4 The Students

The students are in the first year of university studying economics and come from all over Japan. There are 26 classes of about 20 students each with classes 1 through 3 taught by the native speaker instructor. Classes are assigned by level, but even within each class there is a range of communicative language ability from high-a returnee student who spent one year in high school in the US-to low-students who cannot or are unwilling to use English for oral communication. In general, however, students are highly motivated despite their communicative ability. Ratio of men to women ranges from 10:1 in one class to about 5:1 in the other and 4:1 in another.

3.0 Analysis

Pollard (1997, p. 4) rightly says, "teaching is a complex and highly skilled activity which, above all, requires classroom teachers to exercise judgement in deciding how to act." To make proper judgments requires that teachers think about their teaching. He (Ibid.) continues to explain that "[r]eflective teaching is seen as a process through which the capacity to make such professional judgments can be developed and maintained." Conscientious teachers must not only think about their teaching, but also study what they and their students have been doing in the classroom and its effect on the learning environment. Finally, they must decide what improvements if any need to be made and how to make them. This study has been made to that end.

Although charts are given and some simple statistical analysis made to help describe the course, they are not the most important part of this study. More important is how the people involved reacted to the course. And while percentages of how many students liked or disliked the class can be given, their comments and reactions are seen as more important. Also, missing are test results showing how students performed compared to students in other classes with different instructors

and different methods (see the discussion of Nunan 1992 pp. 92-94 above.) For one, tests of communicative ability such as the TOEIC test do not apply to this syllabus, and other measures of achievement are largely subjective anyway. Admittedly, it is probably difficult for students to say to the instructor's face that they don't like the class. On the other hand, when the instructor asks and sees hesitation on the part of the student, clarification can be quickly and easily sought, and rather than a yes or no answer, an explanation for why the student disliked the class or wasn't motivated can be found and should be noted. This is far more valuable than mere numbers, although it is recognized that numbers lend weight and authority to the responses below.

The analysis does, however, begin with some cut and dried answers about the language used in the course including the results of an investigation into the vocabulary that was generated, and a look at how students spent their time in class.

3.1 Computer English in the Classroom

Because the course is centered on computers, the Internet and writing, a core vocabulary quickly developed. Words that were used quite often, not surprisingly, were computer related. For example, "click," "drag," "file," "folder," "homepage," "URL," "address," etc. After one or two class sessions, the instructor was able to use these words quite naturally without having the students panic. As with TPR (total physical response) the instructor could quickly check the students' understanding by observing their actions, and students could easily see whether they had understood or not by looking at their classmates. This strength in numbers was perhaps a factor for some students in becoming comfortable in the class. Unlike conversation classes or even grammar translation classes, where the student is often put on the spot by the teacher to perform some task in English, students could feel safe in their anonominity and still be rewarded for performing the requested task correctly.

Many words related to computers and to the Internet are loan words. Students were asked to list English words related to computers and the Internet that they already knew. In the three classes surveyed, all students understood the following words:

click	computer	display
floppy disk	keyboard	monitor
mouse	printer	screen

Although some students knew other computer related words, not all students shared this knowledge base.

The instructor followed the syllabus provided for the most part, but rather than explain using the Japanese of the textbook, used English based on a loose translation instead. In addition to these words were words not found in the text that frequently came up like "freeze" for when the computer stopped responding to commands and words to refer to individual keys such as the control, alternate, shift, cursor and tab keys.

The following is a list of frequently used content words from these explanations.

Verbs:

access	align	back space	back up	bookmark	boot
click	close	copy	cut	delete	download
drag	enter	highlight	insert	input	justify
move	open	paste	print	save	scroll
space	spell check	surf	type	underline	undo

Nouns:

application	backup	cursor	command	desktop	folder
font	home page	keys	password	ruler	search engine
status bar	toolbar/box	task bar	user ID	URL	web page

Not surprisingly, since this was to some extent a "how to" class, much of the language was in the form of imperatives as the instructor gave the students not only definitions of computer hardware and explanations for writing but also directions on what to do with the computer hardware and software and how to write paragraphs and put an essay together. The following is a typical set of instructions given to the class:

Right click on the screen and a command box will appear beneath the cursor. Move the cursor down to the "shinkisakusei" -the "new"--command, and another command box will appear next to the first box. Slide the cursor over and click on "folder" and a new folder will be created on the computer's desktop.

A quick look around the room and at the work on the screens of the students' computers tells whether they understood the instructions. Students who are having trouble can then be helped before continuing to the next set of instructions.

Although input in most conversation classes tends to be haphazard, the vocabulary of content courses centers round a common theme and can therefore be more easily and thoroughly reinforced. In the *English and the Internet* course, vocabulary centers on three main areas: computers, the Internet, and writing. The words related to computers and the Internet used throughout the class are reinforced by repeated use, and students soon become comfortable with them. The vocabulary generated by discussions about their writing, however, is much more varied and is less likely to be retained. Nonetheless, an interesting follow up study would be to see how much of this vocabulary was retained by the students.

3.2 Use of Japanese

English was the medium of instruction throughout the course and was used by the instructor more than 90% of the time. Japanese was used sparingly only to clarify topics when all other methods of explanation were exhausted. Some words, however, were repeated because of their convenience, for example the "teishutsu folder" or "in folder" (the computer folder students use for handing in or submitting work) and the "haifu folder" or "out folder" (the computer folder the instructor uses for handing out or distributing files) were indispensable.

3.3 Language Learning

While a measure can be made using, for example, the TOEIC test to compare student achievement, the course was not an intensive communications class. Rather, language learning was a byproduct of a course designed to help students gain confidence in using the computer for research and writing. The object was to teach students to use word processing software for writing English texts and search engines to find information on the web. Therefore a more accurate measure of how well students have mastered these objectives is to test whether they can produce researched paragraphs in English using the computer (see Short 1993 for a discussion of evaluating content based courses.) Whilst a key to this type of class is the input students receive in the target language, listening and speaking ability developed as a natural result of the learning

process. Nonetheless, the instructor did, in fact, notice that students became more comfortable working in the English language environment as the course progressed and at least one student commented on this in his final project as did others in discussion with the instructor after class.

3.4 Time on Task: how students spent their time in class

In the second semester, students were observed for one hour, and the time they spent reading, writing, and speaking English during the class was recorded as well as time spent reading Japanese web sites and time off task. A five-minute observation schedule was used; every five minutes, notes were made of what the students were doing at the time, their activities sorted into the five categories in the table below and averaged together. Averages are expressed as minutes and rounded to the nearest minute$_3$. Lessons including explanations, examples, practice tasks and information the instructor needed to give the students in order to get them started were conducted in English at the beginning of each lesson. These generally ran from 15minutes to an hour or more, being longer at the beginning of the course and gradually becoming shorter and shorter.

Class	reading	writing	speaking	reading Japanese	off task
Class 1	6min.	24min.	4min.	14min.	13min.
Class 2	4min.	23min.	3min.	19min.	11min.
Class 3	6min.	23min.	3min.	16min.	12min.

The measure is of necessity a rather rough estimate of student activity. While the five-minute schedule may be too long an interval and the observations too few and therefore give a false impression of what the students did during the entire class, it was the simplest way of recording student activity. A glance around the class was usually sufficient to see what students were doing at the time. Of course, since these are averages, some students spent much more time than others on some of these tasks than others. Furthermore, it can be noted that students did not spend all of their time working and spent some time off task simply chatting or even surfing sites not related to the course.

Nonetheless, from the results it can be seen that the students spent a vast amount of their work time on writing. The relatively low amount of speaking time while disappointing reflects perhaps the fact the students did not consult with the instructor every class session. Also disappointing was the time spent reading English. Students overwhelmingly used Japanese websites to find

information for their reports. While some did make an effort to read through the recommended web sites, many found it easier to use the Japanese language sites. Although this is discouraging, it does show an amount of resourcefulness on the part of the students, but in future should perhaps be discouraged. Not surprising was the amount of time spent on writing. Many found this the most difficult part of the class, and the effort required to produce even one sentence in English or even translate drafts from Japanese into English shows, which suggests another possible study: to see whether it is better to have students write directly in English or whether writing drafts in Japanese then translating into English is more effective.

4.0 Feedback

In this section, the more intangible analysis of the course is attempted. Was the course successful? Did the students learn anything? Did they leave the course with a greater appreciation for English and the Internet? Often, students were simply asked whether they liked the course or thought it was interesting. In some cases, students volunteered the information during informal discussions during or after class.

4.1 Student reaction from the instructor's point of view

Three classes of about 20 students each began the program. Of the 60 or so students, two dropped the class before even attending one session. By the end of the first semester, five more students had dropped the class. In the second semester, three other students seemed to have given up. The two who dropped the class before the first semester began said they didn't have the confidence to learn how to use computers from a native speaker and felt that it would be easier to learn in a Japanese teacher's class. The five who gave up before the end of the first semester gave similar reasons for leaving the course: one felt that she could learn better from a Japanese teacher, two others felt it was too difficult to learn both how to use a computer and communicative English simultaneously and were too insecure of their understanding of the teacher's explanations in English, while another two gave no reason for leaving the course. On the other hand, two who gave up during the second semester gave various reasons. Two were overwhelmed by the course work and have since left the school according to their friends. A third student who left after the start of the second semester was frank enough to say that he didn't like English and in fact didn't like foreigners very much and wanted to take the class next year with a Japanese teacher.

While a few students (three in one class, one in another, but none in the last or about 8% of the students who finished the course) were clearly uncomfortable with the method of instruction and the lack of explanation in Japanese, most, including those who were uncomfortable, had no difficulty with the course. A majority of the students expressed no opinion about the class one way or the other, yet worked contently on their writing projects. Although the text gives ample explanation in Japanese to back up the teacher's explanations, the fact that they did so reinforces the conclusion that they understood the instructions well enough and that they followed along was encouraging. More importantly, during the extensive work periods provided during class sessions, students were able to consult with the teacher who insisted they use English. Although some students understandably had difficulty expressing themselves in spoken English, the opportunity to speak English was invaluable for some.

Of course, a number of students welcomed this chance to try their English and made an effort to use English (again, only the 8% refused to use English in class outright.) Others--three or four in each class--perhaps due to shyness or a dislike of speaking English, tended to keep quiet and avoided speaking with the instructor, but did when pressed. Nonetheless, when the instructor insisted on seeing their work and consulting with them about it all students were able to follow the recommendations given to improve their work. Fortunately, there were many students who seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the course and with a little encouragement began to seek out the teacher for instruction. Students, especially at the university level, should be encouraged to become independent learners who can ask questions and find answers on their own initiative.

Also of interest are those hard working students who are simply too quiet yet do well with little attention from the instructor. A fear is that these students will become neglected while more aggressive or more problematic students monopolize the instructor's time. It is appreciated that these students seem to need little attention and appear to be independent learners already, but the fact that they are overlooked seems a pity.

More gratifying to the instructor were the several students in each class (one in one class, two in another two in a third or about 10%) who showed enthusiasm for not only learning how to use the computer to research and write a report, but also for communicating in English and learning about the language. They did admit that it was difficult and sometimes intimidating to have a native English speaker as their teacher, but that it was a good experience and that they learned a lot. A few students said they became more comfortable with using English, especially listening to lectures

given in that language. Some also noticed that while it was difficult at first, sometimes very difficult, it became easier and easier.

4.2 Student Comments about the Course (from their reports)

Many students commented at the end of their research reports that the class and the project in particular were interesting and worthwhile. Some noted that the project provided them with a welcome opportunity to learn about Japan while a few commented about the method of instruction.

Although I did not introduce all the various sightseeing places that I did not know, there are many located in Maebashi. I did not have a good impression especially about Maebashi. However, I investigated various things of Maebashi, and I got to know it is a good town. This time, it became a very good opportunity to know Maebashi. (2002 Class 3 student 102-129)

I did not know about NAHA well. But this opportunity bring me understanding about NAHA very well. And according to this incident, I am interesting in NAHA more and more. (2002 Class 3 student 102-211)

I learned many things by research. Mito is ultimately wonderful...I thought Mito is place Japanese have to visit. (2002 Class 2 student 102-420)

While I undertook this project, I began to think that nothing is more important and faster than to go there. "Seeing is Believing." The more I examined it, the more interested I became in it. At the last, this project gave me a good chance. Thank you. (2002 class 2 student 102-342)

My college life is so fun because classes are so fun and interesting. Especially, our teacher who teaches us English is so cool. He teaches us good English. But, sometimes, his English is too fast for me to hear. (2002 Class 3, student 102-217)

English class is conducted only in English. These things make me so uneasy. (2002 class 1 student 102-086)

Thanks to this examination, I can know Sendai City than ever before. The city's history and

products and climate and etc... (2002 class 1 student 102-088)

These comments and the others like it are very encouraging since they justify the course and provide evidence that at least some of the objectives were met. On the other hand, only a careful study with pretests and post-testing will be able to tell how much English was learned. It should be kept in mind, however, that the class was not *about* English, and language learning was not the objective at all.

4.3 Additional comments from interviews and surveys

Students were asked what they liked about the course and what they did not like about the course. The following are some typical answers.

Several students said that the class was fun because they got to use the computer to surf the web while others thought it was interesting because they learned a lot from their research. This is borne out in many of the comments written at the conclusion of their reports. In addition, quite a few students thought the class was good because they got a lot of individual attention. Since the course was run as a writing workshop much of the time, students spent most of their time researching and writing and consulting with the instructor. Sometimes the questions were technical in nature and about finding information on the web. Other times, students wanted help understanding a homepage. But most of the time was spent on checking the written work. Finally, there were a few students who appreciated the learning environment because they were able to immerse themselves in English. Indeed, most students wanted and expected the instructor to use English and felt that since it is an English class that of course the medium of instruction should be English, even the students who complained that it was difficult to understand.

On the other hand, there were several students who for one reason or another did not adapt to the learning environment. They either could not understand or did not want to use English. In one case, a student expressed the opinion that the teacher should lecture and not let students work in class. But it was not clear whether this was due to a lack of understanding or a mismatch between learning and teaching styles. This student and others who admitted that they could not understand the directions when given in English said that they didn't know what to do. When all else failed, the students were instructed in Japanese and were finally able to collect at least some information on their topic and put a few paragraphs together.

Finally, several students expressed a desire to choose the topic for research themselves and felt frustrated by having to research a topic they were not interested in. One suggested economics as the topic of research, an excellent idea considering that most of them are economics majors.

4.4 Consensus

The general feeling of the three classes seems to be, then, that while they may have been able to learn more about computers and that it may have been easier to understand had the course been taught in their native tongue, the experience was worth it because they felt they learned more English since the class was taught using only that language. Language learning aside, many enjoyed the way the class was conducted in a workshop style with ample opportunities to consult with the teacher about their writing.

5.0 Recommendations and Conclusion

One of the great advantages of a content-based syllabus is that it frees the teacher from having to follow any one method of language instruction. Explicit language teaching can be done on an ad hoc basis in the most appropriate way whether it is communicative language teaching or some structural approach. Students can be given tips for learning that may include habit formation such as memorizing lists of words and phrases to more cognitive methods such as contextualizing language items. And for some students, learning a foreign language can be unpleasant and tedious. Learning language through content can be a much more enjoyable way to study especially if the subject is an interesting one.

Finally, the immersion style of teaching, although difficult at first for many students, is ultimately rewarding. Students eventually become comfortable with the language and gain confidence in using it.

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6.0 Footnotes

1. See http://www.katoh-net.ac.jp/Elementary/e_imm.htm

2. See Messerklinger, J. and Valentine, A. 2003. English for Specific Purposes: Teaching at a Petrochemical Company. *Gunma Kosen Review* 21.

3. This data could also be expressed, perhaps more accurately, in terms of a simple number of times observed, e.g. during the first observation period for class 1, 12 of the 15 students present were reading, or at least looking at, a web page in English while the other three were off task. It was felt, however, that expressing the results as minutes gives a better picture of what students were doing during that hour of class.

7.0 References

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