

# Successful Employment of Content Based Learning Instruction for EFL University Students

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to convey the benefits of a content based approach to learning and instruction in comparison to other more language focused approaches. It will focus on the use of this approach at university level in the EFL context for advanced level learners. Past research on this approach has shown the benefits of the exposure to vast amounts of new lexical and morpho-syntactical input, whilst engaging in authentic meaningful tasks. The learning of language is presented as immediately useful for taking part in relevant class discussions leading to intrinsic motivation (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). The approach also has the additional benefit of improving academic learning skills (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), such as, analysing key concepts, producing and voicing opinions based on them. As well as, other basic study skills useful in future study or a work abroad context, such as listening and note taking in a lecture, Western style essay writing and basic classroom communication skills. Comparisons will be drawn between immersion programs, adjunct models of content based learning and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and the various advantages and disadvantages of each. Finally, the paper will discuss implementation of content based learning in a Japanese university teaching context and the benefits observed.

## Keywords

Content Based Learning (CBL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), CBL in a Japanese university setting

## 1 Introduction

Recent research has indicated that second language learning and acquisition are achieved through a collaborative interactional process, whereby learners start to appropriate the language of interaction for their own purposes (Donato, 1994, 2000; Engerstrom & Middleton, 1996; Gibbons, 2003; Ohta, 1995; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Wells, 1999). Furthermore, social theories of language suggest whether people learn a language, their ability to control their use of it and for what purpose they use it are dependent on the social interactional situations, which they encounter (Halliday, 1993; Painter, 1984). Therefore, it is not surprising that recent years have seen an increase in the appearance of Content Based Learning (CBL) in EFL university curricula. The purpose of these CBL classes is often to prepare learners for the required level and the rigorous challenges of academic programs abroad. In such programs, students' academic success will depend upon their level of preparedness and they will need to learn and widen their knowledge of the required content so as not to trail behind native classmates. Another purpose of these classes is to prepare students for foreign workplace environments or domestic workplace environments, where a high proficiency of English (often in a specific field) is required.

The aim of this paper is to closely examine how effective CBL can be in the setting of a Japanese university class of advanced level learners. In particular, how well it supports the building of speaking fluency, reading, listening and writing skills. Furthermore, to assess its strength, as opposed to more language focused approaches to pedagogy. This paper is structured as follows: Section 1 is an introduction to the background of this study, section 2 is a literature review giving a summary of previous studies on CBL, section 3 looks at the strengths of a CBL approach over other approaches such as immersion, CLIL and

adjunct models of CBL, section 4 is a profile of the syllabus that was the basis of the study, section 5 explains the methodology of the study, section 6 is the results and analysis of the study, section 7 discusses limitations of the study and section 8 concludes the paper.

## 2 Literature Review

CBL instruction uses the content topic as a means of implicit language instruction in contrast to traditional language teaching, which uses a language focus such as explicit grammar instruction or vocabulary lists. Instruction must be adjusted to meet the needs of the language learner. Therefore, the content should be chosen based upon their needs and interests. The course should feature the uses the learner will make of the target language in the future, build upon their previous learning experience and expose them to meaningful language in use. Goals of a CBL university course might include improving language skills, passing academic tests, being able to comprehend lectures and take notes effectively, being able to understand and answer questions and being able to employ critical thinking.

Content based learning could be said to mimic a natural first language learning environment, where the target language is used naturally as the medium of instruction and negotiation. This could be seen as second in effectiveness to a study abroad immersion program. Swain (1993) in her pushed output hypothesis stated that a learner benefits from being forced to use effort to create accurate and appropriate utterances. However, Canadian bilingual immersion programs failed to assist students to gain high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence because they only provided limited opportunity for students to talk in the classroom. This tends to show that study abroad programs do not always create the optimum second language environments that many may imagine they do. Learners pay attention to syntactic processing when they are pushed to produce messages that are concise and socially appropriate (Swain, 1993). It is the responsibility of the teachers or coordinators of immersion programs to create the opportunities for this to take place.

Study abroad programs can be overwhelming for some learners. If the learners are put in a class with native speakers, they may struggle to comprehend input or lack the confidence to participate and produce output. On the other hand in a content based lesson the teacher can adjust the complexity of input selected or the amount of input to match the level of the students and provide scaffolding where necessary. Sufficient feedback can be provided to positively praise and raise confidence or to correct and point students towards better understanding.

An adjunct model of content based learning describes a two-linked course – a language course and a content course. Content is shared and courses complement each other with respectively chosen assignments. The language course teacher teaches language the students will employ gainfully in their content classes. Studies have proven this to be highly beneficial for students whose proficiency level is not sufficient enough for complex content or whose language skills require intervention. However, the creation of such a course is not a simple task. Institutions are unlikely to grant enough lesson time and if they do agree to allow the running of two collaborative classes, a great deal of coordination is necessary to ensure the curricula of the classes are complementary and courses must constantly be modified to achieve this goal.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is defined as “an approach that integrates language and content” (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009). This approach is growing in popularity and many teachers around the globe try to combine authentic text and tasks with language focused learning to support them. CLIL is beneficial for lower level students who need more explicit instruction. However, content based learning could be more beneficial for more advanced learners as an implicit interactional language learning approach. Krashen (1981) would argue that explicit knowledge cannot be converted to implicit and others such as Rod Ellis (1994) claim that the conversion is extremely difficult.

Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development describes how collaboration with more capable peers assists learners to achieve success in areas where they cannot achieve success independently and this how learning occurs. Mediated learning allows for interaction of the learner and their environment, the learner and an artefact or an object. Independent, high proficiency learners are able to mediate their own actions with the object, while those that are less developed might need to use an artefact (such as a dictionary, a classmate or a teacher). Inductive instruction presents the learner with particular forms and pushes them to make generalizations about the form, meaning and usage by themselves (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

### 3 CBL in a Japanese University

Content based learning can have several advantages over other approaches, such as immersion, CLIL or adjunct models of CBL. Learners are exposed to vast amounts of new lexical and morpho-syntactic input, whilst engaging in authentic meaningful tasks. The input is real, authentic and immediately useful for a real means, thus making it generalizable for the learner (Prabhu, 1987). If both the language and content are interesting and fit an immediate goal it is intrinsically and instrumentally motivating for the students (Grabe & Stoller, 1987). The instruction fits the needs of the learner in terms of teaching western study skills along with content they may go on to study in the future. Students are required to learn both subject matter and language simultaneously to avoid falling behind (Kranhke, 1987). The use of authentic materials has been found to increase learners' interest in learning (Rivers, 1987) and improve both aural and language development (Miller, 2005), as well as listening comprehensive ability (Otte, 2006). Bantmeir (2008) claimed that comprehensive reading of authentic texts should be used as a core part of the language curriculum.

The ultimate goal of a CBL course should be the acquiring of information through the second language and at the same time developing academic learning skills. The hope is that these skills will transfer to other academic courses given in their second language (Brinton, 1989). The classes ought to use authentic reading materials, which allow students to think and learn via the second language in order to interpret and evaluate the text.

The main aspect to consider when designing a CBL syllabus is that it should be based around the content (Richards, 2016). The classes should use authentic materials that force the learner to use second language skills to interpret and evaluate the text. The course should build on the learners' previous knowledge and learning experience and expose them to meaningful language in use that they will be able to employ themselves in the future. Reading and writing should be employed as linked cognitive tasks. The synthesis of information from different texts with prior knowledge allows for interaction with the text and modification of schemata to build new knowledge. Writing should also be used to promote the forming of meaning and synthesizing of information from other input (Kasper, 2000). Students should work together in small groups, taking part in tasks where they exchange knowledge and experiences allowing for connections with the content and language. Therefore, instructors of CBL must understand the challenges of second language learners and in turn be able to help learners overcome their language weaknesses. Learners should be given scaffolding in terms of language but also in terms of the concepts within the content in order to understand complex ideas within the authentic text.

### 4 Profile of a CBL University Syllabus

The syllabus profiled in this paper is a fourteen-week film studies course at a upper mid-tier Japanese private university. The class consisted of seven students in their third and fourth year, who had chosen the class an elective class (under the banner of a social and cultural studies class aimed at advanced level English learners). It featured one 1.5 hour session per week. The syllabus is based around a simplified undergraduate film studies course at a British university, condensed to a few basic theories or terms in each field and with lower expectations of the students in terms of class discussion, reading and essay writing. The usual class structure consisted of a Power Point presentation explaining key terms and theories, which was followed by examples in film clips with discussion questions for students to check their understanding and to hear their own ideas about the theories, methods and clips and their previous experience of the methods seen. For example, two questions following a clip of Aladdin were, "Can you recognize Propp's<sup>1</sup> characters in the clip of Aladdin you have just watched? What other examples of Propp's characters can you give? Discuss with your group."

The classes were also followed by a writing homework. Each writing homework was collected the following week, given feedback and comments on both content and format and then returned the following week and the students were told they could submit their work again after reading the comments on their first draft and redrafting in order to try to improve their work and obtain a higher grade. Many followed an essay format for example, "Watch a movie and then write an essay to answer the following question, how does the movie follow Todorov's theory of equilibrium?". Others did not follow the traditional essay style but included some more creative task with a writing element, for example, "Design and draw six costumes and props to match these character types and write a paragraph to explain your choices for each one".

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<sup>1</sup> Vldamir Propp was a Russian scholar who analysed 8 broad character types in Russian folklore, which are often still discussed in relation to literature and film to this day.

The syllabus also included a practical element of film making. Starting in week 8 students began to storyboard, script, film and edit short films in small groups. The final classes involved the screening of and critiquing of the films.

## 5 Methodology

The instructor monitored and made notes on observations of improvements in aspects of the students' language use and content knowledge in class discussions, practical tasks and written work. During the final session students were given a questionnaire that contained Likert scale questions about their perceived levels of speaking fluency, listening skill, and reading skill in the target language and knowledge of the content of the class both before and after the course.

## 6 Results and Analysis

The classes seemed to be beneficial for students in a number of ways. Firstly, the instructor made these observations: during class discussions fluency, length of answers, complexity of answers (lexis and morpho-syntax) and accuracy in new forms, which learners were repeatedly exposed to, seemed to improve. Confidence in language use, content knowledge and readiness to answer questions also seems to be raised. The students' written work vastly improved as the course progressed in terms of content (ability to answer the questions and discuss the topics and themes academically), language use (ability to coherently and accurately express thoughts and opinions in the target language) and western academic writing format and style.

Table 1: Graph showing average of students' perceived improvements in language

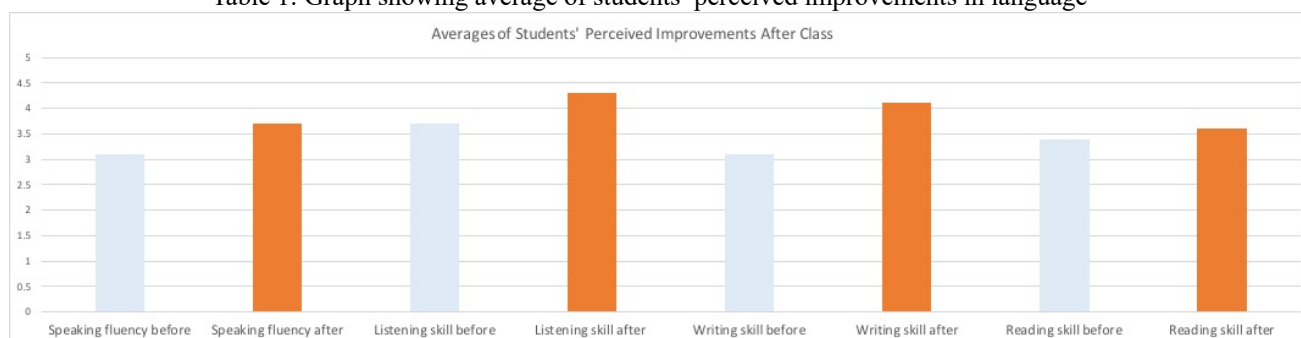
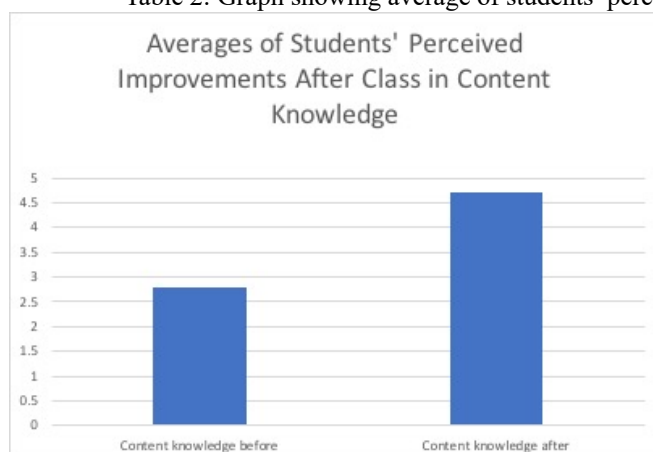


Table 2: Graph showing average of students' perceived improvements in knowledge of the content



The questionnaire results show that the students concur both their knowledge of film and language skills have improved significantly due to this class. Figure 1 shows students perceived an average improvement of 0.6 in their speaking fluency and listening skill, 1.0 in writing skill and 0.2 in reading skill. The reasons for most significant improvements in writing skill could be due to many of the learners having little previous experience in western style academic essay writing and the significant amount of essay writing that was required during the course. Speaking and listening having a high level of improvement is most likely due to the large amount of discussion required in class, negotiation during practical tasks and the

viewing of vast amounts of authentic audio visual texts in the form of English language films. Reading skill did not show much significant improvement but that may be due to the fact this was a film studies class and most of the input students received was in the form of audio visual rather than reading texts. Content knowledge showed a very significant improvement of 1.9. Only one student said that their knowledge of the content had not improved. This seems to convey that CBL can provide EFL learners with adequate content instruction in the target language without the need for explicit language learning support.

## 7 Discussion

This study only shows the learners' perceived improvements in the selected language skills and knowledge of the content. In order to validate real gains made in the chosen areas further testing is required, such as pre and post testing of knowledge of the course content along with testing of fluency, listening, reading and writing skills. In addition, further testing of course content specific high frequency vocabulary acquisition, might produce significant data in relation to the effectiveness of CBL in assisting English for Specific Purpose (ESP) vocabulary.

## 8 Conclusion

This paper appears to support past research in finding that through collaborative social interaction processes CBL can be an effective tool in assisting learners to not only widen their knowledge of the content but also to improve their speaking fluency along with reading, writing and listening skills.

There are a number of advantages to a content based syllabus. Content based classes teach language relevant to the learner and therefore they tend to lead to increased motivation and in turn a better learning environment. A CBL syllabus allows learners to learn subject matter and language simultaneously. Language is used in context, naturally and authentically. The content matches what the learners need to learn. The approach allows for integration of all four skills and the use of genuine materials.

The CBL approach also has some disadvantages. One weakness is that it can lead to fossilization if learners decide to use simple sentence structures to survive. Students may become overly reliant on compensatory communication strategies, only using what is comfortable. The approach can be overwhelming for beginning or low level students. The approach may not be effective where achievement is measured by tests focusing on narrowly defined formal features of the TL. Furthermore, CBL classes often focus on reading and listening skills so do not guarantee successful communicative ability.

It is considering all of these points that a content based film studies class was developed for current teaching context and it has been vastly successful in motivating students, promoting learning of both content and language and successful language acquisition.

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