Content-based EFL Approaches and Immersion Approaches

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Some Japanese universities are considering changing from using traditional SLA approaches for language teaching and employing other approaches, like content-based approaches and immersion approaches, which are relatively new for Japan. There are some similarities and differences in these two approaches. One difference is that immersion approaches require students to spend more time in the target language than content-based approaches. However, both approaches are aimed at increasing students' skills and knowledge in the subject areas, and in both approaches untrained teachers face difficulties in teaching profound knowledge to students whose target language skills are limited. Comparing these approaches and learning teaching techniques for these approaches will benefit EFL teachers.

今までの言語教育を見直し、比較的新しいコンテント・ベースト及びイマージョン語学教育法に注目する日本の大学は多い。この二つの教育法にはいくつかの類似点と相違点がある。例えば、イマージョン法では学生達が学校環境において第二言語を使用する割合がコンテント・ベーストより格段に大きい。一方、どちらの教育法も語学以外の教科に関する知識習得を目標としているが、その結果、限られた第二言語能力を持つ学生達に、いかに各学科における「知識」を伝えることができるかが問題となる。これらの類似点・相違点を学び、より効果的な語学教育を目指す事が語学教師として重要である。

In the second semester of 2002, Shinshu University, a national university located in Nagano prefecture, launched a test new project, "Teaching All Content-based Classes in the General Education in English." The university is considering developing an immersion program in the future, and this project is for research purposes. This test project is actually a type of "hard content-based program" (Goodmacher and Kajiura, 2000, p.20). The differences between these two programs will be explained later. The project was implemented to affect the freshmen. Two test classes for this project are "Introduction to Intercultural Communication" and "Introduction to Psychology." The target language of the classes is English, and L1 is not used to facilitate the

acquisition of the L2 (Refer to Appendix A for the details of the project proposal). In this paper, I will discuss the reasons for implementing this program, the details and the results of this program from pragmatic and pedagogical aspects, and a few effective activities used in the Intercultural Communication class.

There were pedagogical and administrative reasons to initiate this program. A number of Japanese universities are putting more effort into fostering students to be scientists who can communicate in English and "compete on the international stage" ("Scientists' English Targeted," January 23, 2003). To accomplish this, some Japanese universities, including Shinshu University, are considering the pedagogical effectiveness of the immersion approach and are experimenting with offering new courses in which classes are conducted in English.

Most Japanese universities which are interested in the immersion approach are hesitant about applying it to their entire school curriculum. These universities, including Shinshu University, usually provide only a few subject classes taught in a foreign language. University administrators who are considering the development of a partial immersion or total immersion program in the future plan to examine the advantages and disadvantages of an immersion approach by using a few hard content-based classes as test cases.

Comparison and contrast between content-based approach and immersion approach

The biggest difference between an immersion approach and a content-based approach is the emphasis on time during which students are exposed to the target language. In a total immersion program, students must spend all of their time studying in the target language. In a partial immersion program, students spend approximately fifty percent of school time in the target language. On the other hand, a content-based approach does not require such extensive periods of exposure time to the target language to reach its goals. Some schools may have only one content-based class.

However, the goals of a hard content-based approach and an immersion approach are similar. The main goal of the hard content-based approach or "strong content-based approach" as it is called by Brown (1994) is to teach the content matter to students who assume that class will emphasize content. Some of the goals of the immersion approach stated by Myriam Met (1993) are the same as goals of the content-based approach. These shared goals are below:

1. Developing a high level of proficiency in the foreign language
2. Gaining skills and knowledge in the content areas of the curriculum in keeping with stated objectives in these areas

Since they share these goals, school administrators who are implementing content-based classes as test cases for future immersion programs can obtain useful information and learn from the results of these tests.

However, those administrators and teachers must be aware of the tremendous amount of effort and expense involved in providing and running an effective immersion program. For example Met (1993) addressed six essential elements of a successful immersion program. The six key elements are below:

1. administrative support
2. community and parental support
3. qualified teachers
4. appropriate materials in the foreign language
5. time for teachers to prepare instructional materials in the language
6. ongoing staff development

Although the six elements also apply to hard content-based EFL programs, the immersion approach needs more of each element. Meeting all of the needs above for a successful immersion program requires budget adjustments to facilitate necessary reforms. Initiating a total immersion program costs more than a content-based program. Tasks such as obtaining suitable teaching materials, evaluating immersion programs, hiring qualified teachers, promoting faculty development, and so on require enormous amounts of money. Most national universities, including Shinshu University, are unlikely to commit themselves to such radical change.

Additionally, some university administrators may question if implementing a late immersion program for college students is really worthwhile, considering the cost, the time, and the effort. Although, some SLA researchers do not wholeheartedly agree with "the earlier the better" for language acquisition (Lapkin, Hart and Swain,1992; Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow, 2000; Scovel, 2000), most researchers accept that young language learners generally achieve higher levels of proficiency than adult language learners.

Appropriate materials

The selection of appropriate materials is of extreme importance in both the content-based approach and the immersion approach. Most teachers in the applied linguistics field agree with Krashan's Comprehensive Input Hypothesis (1985). Krashan proposes that in order to facilitate a successful SLA process, the L2 input has to consist of linguistic features one level just slightly beyond the students' current L2 level. Krashan describes comprehensible input as '$i + 1$'; 'i' indicates the present linguistic knowledge of a learner and '+1' stands for the next level. Unfortunately, the L2 competence of most Shinshu University freshmen is insufficient for comprehending academic textbooks written for native English speaking college students. Linguistic features used in college-level textbooks are not '$i + 1$', but could be '$i + 10$' or even '$i + 100$' for the majority of our freshmen.

There are numerous intercultural communication and content-based EFL textbooks, but many of them are inappropriate. Although the English language level of those textbooks might be appropriate for first year college students, the content is not profound enough for college-level classes. Many of the textbooks only teach superficial cultural content, for example, Halloween in America, Christmas in European countries, and exotic food in Asian countries. Some emphasize very basic differences in behavior between people of different cultural backgrounds, for example, eating and greeting. Unfortunately, most of them do not teach profound theoretical and psychological aspects of intercultural communication. Therefore, I decided not to use any textbooks for my class.

Teaching the deep meanings of abstract concepts, like culture, is not an easy task. Many teachers mistakenly limit the depth of the topics they teach because their students have limited L2 skills. Nonetheless, I do believe that teachers with a strong command of the target language can teach profound topics using L2 as the medium language if they have competence in the specific subject area and pedagogical knowledge in the SLA field. According to Met (1993), these are competences which teachers in immersion classes or content-based classes must have.

Student evaluation

Since the program started, two semesters have passed, and I have taught two intercultural communication classes, one class for each semester. At the end of each semester, students evaluated the classes. The first student evaluation was composed of twenty-five questions and the second evaluation was composed of nineteen questions regarding qualities of the teacher, appropriateness of the teaching materials, achievement of the class and the preciseness of the syllabus. The result of the evaluation was that the students were generally satisfied with the classes. Some important points will be discussed below.

Preciseness of the syllabus

Students answered questions regarding how satisfied they were with the class syllabus. Those questions were "Did the syllabus correctly describe class content?" and "Did the syllabus have enough information?" Approximately 83% had positive feelings regarding the syllabus. About 27% answered "very" and the rest answered "mostly." This result shows that the students had a clear understanding of the aim, content, and approach of the class before taking the class, and the content of the class was generally what they had expected.

Appropriateness of the teaching materials

The student evaluations asked only one question regarding teaching materials, "Were teaching materials presented clearly?" Although approximately 64% answered that the materials were "mostly" or "very" easy to understand, about 15% of the students answered negatively. About 20% said "somewhat," and 1% chose "N/A". Since the students have difficulties in understanding the L2 used in the classroom, the clarity of materials is crucial.

Achievement of the class goals

There were two questions regarding achievement of the class goal, "Did the teacher teach appropriately in order to reach the class goals?" and "Were the class goals fulfilled?" I added the results of the two questions. About 29% answered "very" and 60% answered "mostly." It means that 90% of my students considered that the goals stipulated in the syllabus were accomplished, and that they could learn the knowledge and skills the class aimed at.

Class activities

I used a number of in-class activities to facilitate student comprehension of intercultural communication. Two activities which encourage both interaction and communication are described below. These also convey content knowledge and promote the development of necessary skills, such as self-awareness, for interacting with people from different cultures.

Creating stamps for the international year

Objective: To promote participants' self-awareness of their own culture and understanding of "material culture" and "non-material culture"

Procedure:

1. Divide the participants into small groups of three to five individuals.
2. To each group, pass out a paper which has the outline of a blank postage stamp. Providing a set of coloring pens/crayons to each group always helps to stimulate the participants' artistic motivation.
3. Explain to the participants that they will create a stamp to promote their own country (Japan).
4. Give the participants about 15 minutes to draw pictures which represent their own culture.
5. Ask one participant from each group to present and explain their drawing to the class.
6. Give definitions of "material culture" and "non-material culture."
   Material culture: physical or tangible products that human beings create, e.g., tools, monuments, buildings
   Non-material culture: nonphysical or intangible products that human beings create, e.g., language, beliefs, values (Robertson, 1987)
   Explain that it is more difficult for the students to understand foreign "non-material culture" than "material culture," even though knowledge of non-material culture is essential for effective intercultural communication.
7. Tell students to divide their pictures into the categories of non-material and material culture.

Intercultural communication case study activity

Objective: To analyze a different culture through a case study.
Procedure

1. Separate a critical incident story into two or three sections. (Refer to Appendix B. Appendix B is a case study which was used for a survey of "Foreigners' Reactions to Japan & the Japanese" and "Japanese Reactions to Foreigners" by Naotsuka and Sakamoto (1981)) Fold Appendix B so that the participants can see only one section of the story at a time.
2. Divide the participants into small groups of three to five individuals.
3. Distribute Appendix B to each group.
4. Tell the participants to read the first section of the story and discuss the first question in the group. Follow the same step for the other sections and questions.
5. Show the participants the result of the above mentioned survey. Then, let them work on Task 1.

Conclusion

Both content-based approaches and immersion approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages. Many SLA researchers outside of Japan, especially in Canada, have studied these approaches for a long time. Educational institutions which have implemented immersion programs and content-based programs have achieved considerable results in regard to student achievement. Japanese educators must learn from the research results and adopt, adjust and apply the approaches in the most appropriate way to meet the educational needs of Japanese students and the cultural and economic environments of Japanese universities. The administration of Shinshu University has decided to continue the test project mentioned in this paper for at least one more year.

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Appendix A

Budget request for 2002 project

Department: National university general education center
Title: "Teaching All General Education Classes in English"
Project Description:
[Outline] In order to systematically cultivate a foreign language skill, which is one of the general education requirements, and fundamental liberal arts knowledge/computer skills to pursue specialty course education, Shinshu University needs to improve students' English abilities by providing adequate general education classes. We will improve the environment for promoting the revolutionary reform of the general education system, conduct on-campus opinion polls regarding the reform, and initiate the "Teaching All General Education Classes in English" project.

1. The revolutionary reform would include:
   Conducting all content class lectures in English. Teach IT classes and physical education classes in English. ("Providing education in English" means that both lecturers and students use only English for in-class communication. All textbooks and other teaching materials should be written in English.)
2. Improving the environment for promoting the reform and conducting on-campus opinion polls.
3. Providing a few pilot classes starting the second semester of 2002. The classes will be content classes that are part of the general education. Examine the advantages and disadvantages.

Goals:

2. Strive for the revolutionary reform for a distinguished general education curriculum of Shinshu University.
3. Provide a classroom learning environment in which both Japanese and foreign students can participate. Spur the university's internationalization.
4. Support English education focusing on developing students' basic practical communication abilities by offering classes in which students will "learn in English" not "learn English."
5. Improve the general education curriculum which complements the various departmental majors (specialized education) which curriculum is integrated with international issues.

Appendix B

This is a conversation between Mrs. A and Mrs. B. Mrs. B's daughter has recently started taking piano lessons.

Mrs. A: Your daughter has started taking piano lessons, hasn't she? I envy you, because you can be proud of her talent. I'm really impressed by her enthusiasm – every day, she practices so hard, for hours and hours, until late at night.

(Question1: If you were Mrs. B, how would you reply to Mrs. A's comment?)

Mrs. B replies:
Mrs. B: Oh, no, not at all. She is just a beginner. We hadn't realized that you could hear her playing. I'm sorry that you have been disturbed by her noise.

(Question2: How would you feel about Mrs. B's reply?)

Actual feelings of Mrs. A: It is good thing that the little girl has started taking piano lessons, but the noise of her practicing late at night disturbs the neighborhood.

(Question3: How would you feel about Mrs. A's ways of expressing herself?)

The survey results:
Question: Would you realize that Mrs. A was complaining?
Yes (would realize): 44% (67/154)
No (wouldn't realize): 56% (87/154)

Question: How would you feel about Mrs. A's expression?

Conditional Acceptance: The reason given for conditional rather than positive acceptance was that the respondents would prefer the complaint to be more "direct" or more "clear".
   "I will complain directly in a polite manner." (Hong Kong-Male-Age: 22)
   "More directly, with an air of kindness, hoping for her cooperation." (US-Female- Age: 26)

Emotional Rejection: Rejection was in terms of the following interpretations of Mrs. A's expression of complaint:
   a. Insulting: "I would feel her indirect complaint to be insulting." (US-Male-Age: 31)
   b. Hypocritical, insincere: "Coming from somebody who is obviously hypocritical." (France-Male-Age: 37)

Task 1: Change Mrs. A's complaint so that she complains in the way the above mentioned people would understand and prefer.