

Designing an Effective Content-Based Curriculum

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Language Learning for Life

Many Japanese universities are incorporating academic content-based courses into their English programs. English teachers are being asked to develop and instruct these courses. To develop an effective curriculum, it is important for teachers to define content-based courses to fit the specific needs of their program. Teachers also need to make these academic lessons comprehensible to learners at all proficiency levels. To ensure consistency, teachers must use similar textbooks and materials adaptable to the learners' language levels. However, the majority of English texts and materials available in Japan are four-skills, theme-based communicative English texts and not relevant to content-based courses. Thus, many teachers must create and write materials for learners of varying language proficiency levels. This paper will help define a content-based curriculum, discuss common challenges and provide a sample activity developed for an International relations content course addressing and meeting the needs of learners of differing English proficiency levels.

多くの日本の大学は「アカデミックな内容を中心とする授業」(academic content-based courses)を大学内のプログラムに取り入れ始めている。その結果、英語教員はその内容に沿ったカリキュラムを作り出し、教えることを求められている。

効果的なカリキュラムを構築するにあたって重要なのは、教員がどのような「内容を中心とする授業」がプログラムの特定なニーズに適しているかを判断し明確にすることである。教員は様々な語学レベルの学習者が、授業の内容を理解できるように努める必要がある。カリキュラムの一貫性を確保するために、教員は学習者の語学レベルに合わせて調整可能な類似したテキストや教材を使わなければいけない。しかし、日本国内で販売されているほとんどの英語のテキストや教材は4スキルをベースとした「テーマ中心の内容」であり、「アカデミックな内容を中心とする授業」に適してはいない。そのため多くの教員は、様々な語学レベルの学習者のための教材を自ら作成しなければいけない。

この論文は「内容を中心とするカリキュラム」(content-based curriculum)を定義化することを目指し、カリキュラムを構築する上での課題を検討する。さらに「国際関係を中心とした内容の授業」のために考案された、多様な英語レベルの学習者のニーズに合わせたアクティビティーを例として紹介する。

In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology created an Action Plan for English Education. The plan states as one of the principle goals that “Education for International Understanding, is applicable not only to English classes but also every subject” (MEXT, 2003). Such an educational view aims at instilling a broader perspective and a deeper world understanding. For educators seeking to meet this challenge, content-based language instruction is one approach being used. Consequently, more Japanese universities are including academic content-based language courses in their curriculum and asking English teachers to develop and instruct them.

While it is natural to have native English speakers teach these programs, the majority of the teachers employed by universities are trained in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Linguistics, or Education teachers. Many of them have never taught nor developed curriculum for content-based courses and are daunted by the task of creating an effective curriculum that meets the needs of students and addresses the needs of the school. In order to do this, curriculum developers must define what a content-based curriculum is, recognize the challenges of developing such a curriculum, and then develop a curriculum to fit their specific program. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these issues and how the authors applied them to their own content-based curriculum developed for Asia University.

Defining a Content-based Curriculum

Agreeing on a working definition of content-based courses is a main step in creating an effective curriculum that meets the needs of the students, the university, and the teachers. There are varying definitions to assist in the process of such curriculum development. The questions that need to be answered are: Is it a content-driven course where learning content is the priority? Is it a language-driven course where language-learning tasks take precedence? Or is it somewhere in between? Every university and program will have their own unique needs and educational goals that must be met.

Table 1. Continuum of Content and Language Integration

Source: Met, M. (1999)

Content-Driven	Language-Driven
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content is taught in L2. • Content learning is priority. • Language learning is secondary. • Content objective determined by course goals or curriculum. • Teachers must select language objectives. • Students evaluated on content mastery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content is used to learn L2. • Language learning is priority. • Content learning is incidental. • Language objectives determined by L2 course goals or curriculum. • Students evaluated on content to be integrated. • Students evaluated on language skills/ proficiency.

According to the classification by Met (1999), there is a continuum that integrates language- and content-based courses. It is by analyzing the continuum and then applying it to individual program needs that curriculum developers can meet the goals specific to their content.

At one end of the continuum are content-driven programs, where student learning of the content is the main focus of the course and language learning is secondary. It is the content that determines the instruction, and mastery of the content is the primary goal. Programs that focus mainly on content are those such as immersion programs where the focus of instruction is on the content while learning it in another language. In these programs, little attention is paid

to language instruction. Language emerges from the content and contact with the teacher and other students. Thus, at this end of the continuum, student mastery of the content is primary, and language learning is incidental.

At the other end of the continuum, there are language-driven courses where content becomes a tool for achieving the language learning curriculum. The student is not held accountable for learning the content, but rather for learning the language. In this case, foreign language courses reinforce language acquisition. Programs that are language-driven but use content as a means to teach language select content-based on its usefulness in furthering the language goals. Language learning is primary and content learning is secondary. However, for most programs, curriculum development and instruction are positioned between these two extremes.

Table 2. Content-Based Language Teaching: A Continuum of Content and Language Integration

Source: Met, M. (1999)

Content-Driven ←		Language-Driven →			
Total Immersion	Partial Immersion	Sheltered Courses	Adjunct Courses	Theme-Based Courses	Language classes with frequent use of content for language practice

As previously mentioned, most programs fall in the middle of the continuum and need to use a blending of definitions to meet their needs. The continuum is further defined in Table 2. Met (1999) shows that there are three basic approaches to language and content integration that fit between the two extremes: theme-based courses, adjunct courses, and sheltered courses. These approaches are all suited to university programs. Theme-based courses are language-driven. The aim of theme-based courses is for students to develop L2 skills and proficiency by selecting functional topics that contribute to language learning. Chaput (1993) defines a content-based course as "...any topic of intellectual substance which contributes to the understanding of language in general, and the target language in particular" (p. 150). This is similar to Met's theme-based definition. An example of such courses are four-skill reading, writing, listening, and speaking courses which use topical themes such as sports, food, and directions as vehicles to language learning. Instruction is in the target language with the learner's knowledge and retention of the content purely incidental. Language instructors focus on evaluating L2 learners in terms of language growth rather than mastery of the content.

Adjunct courses fall in the middle of the continuum where both language and content are the goal. Here students are expected to learn content and language simultaneously. Students are evaluated on their mastery of both the content material and L2. University level courses which can be considered adjunct courses include Business English, Travel and Tourism, and English for Academic Purposes. In adjunct courses, both the L1 and the L2 can be used as a means of

instruction, unlike a theme-based course where instruction is in the L2.

Sheltered courses are in the middle of the continuum alongside the adjunct courses. In a sheltered course curriculum, courses are content-driven, but linguistically sensitive teaching strategies are employed to make content accessible in the L2. The subject matter is taught in the L2 at the language level of the students. Curtain and Pescola (1994) support this by stating “...curriculum concepts being taught through the foreign language...appropriate to the grade level of students” (p. 149). Students are evaluated on their mastery of the content while language learning is incidental. Sheltered courses are the most common type of content-based course in Japan and the most applicable to the Japanese university setting.

Other varying views on the definitions of *content* and *content-based instruction* exist. However, in essence, content-based instruction is an integration of both language and content because the extent to which content or language is emphasized will greatly influence how the curriculum is taught and what will be included in it. For the purpose of curriculum development at Asia University, a combination of sheltered and adjunct approaches were found to be the most appropriate for the program while integrating topical-based units.

The Challenges

In 2002, the Center for English Language Education at Asia University was asked to design and instruct a required content-based course for second year International Relation

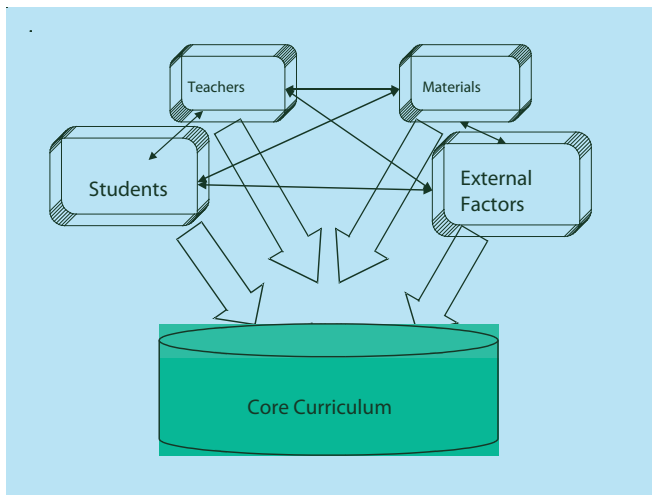
majors starting in 2005. While developing the curriculum, the teachers faced many challenges from inside and outside the Department. In order to develop an effective curriculum that met the needs of all, these challenges had to be recognized and addressed.

When considering the challenges for this course, the following factors were taken into account:

- 1) This is to be a required course for all International Relations majors in their second year.
- 2) The majority of the students will have just returned from a 5-month intensive English study abroad program in the United States.
- 3) The students need to learn similar topics, vocabulary, and ideas.
- 4) This is a program that is to support a required Sophomore International Relations seminar that will be taken simultaneously.

It is important to note that in the seminar structure at Asia University, students are free to choose from a variety of seminar topics within the field of International Relations. However, there are no second year courses that focus on the basics of International Relations. Once these factors were accounted for, the challenges were addressed.

The authors identified four areas that presented challenges in developing the curriculum for the International Relations content course. As seen in Diagram 1 below (Brooks, 2004), these factors included issues related to teachers, materials and students as well as various external factors.



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Figure 1. Challenges of Developing a Content-based Course

Challenges related to students reflect program expectations, student needs, and teacher concerns. These challenges include students of varying English language proficiencies, students' prior knowledge in the content area, and class size.

Since this is a program required of all second year International Relations majors, one of the first challenges is the varying English language proficiencies of the students. However, this is also one of the easiest challenges to remedy because the program allows for streaming students and

placing them into classes according to their English abilities. Prior content knowledge is also a challenge. The teachers have to work with students who may or may not have a solid foundation in International Relations in their first language let alone their second language. Another factor related to student content knowledge is what they were taught in their study abroad programs. There are three different sites at three different universities with different curriculums in the content-based courses. The challenge of class size is also an issue. If the classes are too large in student number, the students may feel that they are not learning. Finally, student interest and motivation to take a content-based course must also be taken into account.

Finding materials for content-based courses presents another set of challenges. The lack of language-appropriate textbooks and materials related to the content is the main challenge. The majority of the materials that content-based curriculums need are neither marketed, nor published in Japan. The materials in Japan are geared specifically towards theme-based language instruction and most publishers do not have access to the materials that are needed for content-based courses. Many publishers, who are marketing strictly EFL materials for Japan and Asia, are not defining content-based materials in the same way that this paper's authors do. Publishers defined *content-based* in terms of *theme-based*, while the authors were defining it as *sheltered* and *adjunct*.

The challenges that curriculum developers have to acknowledge in teaching are the varying teaching styles of instructors, their prior knowledge of the content, and the ability to teach in or utilize the students' native language. Teachers come from varying educational backgrounds and

different experiences, so their teaching styles differ greatly. Thus, curriculum developers need to allow for different styles, and not force one style onto everyone. As mentioned before, the majority of the Native English teachers in Japan are EFL specialists and may not have any prior knowledge of the content to be taught. They may be intimidated by teaching a content-based course if they are unfamiliar with the content. However, if it is approached as, “language instruction that integrates the presentation of topics or tasks from subject matter courses (e.g., Math, social studies) within the context of teaching a second or foreign language” as defined by Crandall and Tucker (1990, p. 187), then having instruction done by EFL teachers is an appropriate choice. Finally, many teachers feel that they need to be able to instruct in the native language of the students. It is the learning of content through English that takes precedence, which means that instruction should be in the target language, with little or no native language support.

The fourth and final area is external factors, such as the goals of the university and the specific department that the content relates to, the organization of students, scheduling, and funding. It is important that the goals of the specific department, in this case International Relations, be incorporated into the curriculum design. By drawing upon prior teacher training and classroom experience, a successful integration of the goals and objectives of both the sponsoring department and English teachers can be met. Since these external factors are outside of the curriculum developers’ direct control, concessions and negotiation with those responsible for these areas at the university must be a priority.

By incorporating the definitions and challenges, the following activities were created for use at all levels of Sophomore English at Asia University. To create the curriculum, the developers used a variety of textbooks, pre-made curriculum, and materials purchased primarily from the United States.

The sample unit on Refugees, for example, was created from the authors’ original materials, pre-made curriculum, and one of many textbooks. The purpose of the activity is to build onto previous units on the United Nations and Human Rights by delving deeper into the topic of Refugees. This activity is to be taught in three steps: 1) Vocabulary building, 2) Reading and discussion, and 3) Project.

Activity 1: Vocabulary (Warm-up and Assessment)

At the beginning of the unit on Refugees, teachers first address vocabulary. The purpose of the vocabulary activity is two-fold. The first is to activate student schemata by having them categorize the given vocabulary. The second is as an assessment of vocabulary items students already know and what needs to be taught:

Step 1: Students are told that the topic of the unit is Refugees. The teacher writes the word on the board.

Step 2: Students are placed into small groups of 3 or 4 and assigned roles: writer, speaker, and English helper. They are then given the handout “Refugee Vocabulary 1” (Appendix 1). N.B. At the highest level, only one handout should be used – “Refugee Vocabulary 1.” The higher levels should be encouraged to also think of other vocabulary related to refugees that they know and to write these words in the

category in which they think the words best fit. Mid to low-level students can be given the handout “Vocabulary 2” (Appendix 2) which has English/Japanese translations. It is up to the teachers’ discretion and knowledge of the students whether or not to hand out the Japanese translations of the words, either before, during or after the students have completed the activity.

Step 3: The teacher then goes over the directions with the students.

Step 4: The students are given a set amount of time to complete the categorization of the vocabulary.

Step 5: The teacher then closes this activity by randomly eliciting answers from the groups and answering questions.

Activity 2: Reading (Discussion and Skimming and Scanning Skills)

This next activity is a reading activity that utilizes skimming, scanning, and critical thinking skills. This in-house created activity uses one of the purchased textbooks “State of the World Atlas” (Smith, 2004, 80-81). Students of all levels can complete most of this activity, while there is a short answer/critical thinking section to be used with mid to high-level students.

Step 1: Students are put into pairs.

Step 2: The teacher gives each student the handout “Refugees” (Appendix 3).

Step 3: Student pairs complete the pre-reading questions.

Step 4: The teacher asks pairs their answers in random order and goes over the vocabulary included on the sheet.

Step 5: Students open their books “State of the World Atlas” to the Refugees map on pages 80 and 81 and complete the skimming and scanning questions.

Step 6: Once students have finished the skimming and scanning section, the teacher checks the answers as a whole class. At this point, the lower levels will be finished with the activity. Mid- to high-level students continue on to answer the short answer questions. The short answer questions begin with answers that can be found in the book, and then the teacher asks the students to use critical thinking to answer the last two.

Step 7: Options for activity closure include pair or small group discussions reflecting on the information the students have learned from the textbook.

Activity 3: Project

The following project was adapted from a purchased curriculum, “Teaching International Relations: Bringing the World to your Classroom” (Superka, 2002). Once the curriculum was purchased, Asia University officially owned the rights to reproduce and adapt the materials for its courses. The purpose of the project is for students to research refugee groups within the community, or their home country. The goal is for them to use their research and what they learn as a means of self-reflection and seeing how these concepts relate to them in their lives as world citizens. This can be done in the following way:

Step 1: In small groups, students identify refugee groups within their own community or country.

Step 2: They choose one group to research.

Step 3: Their research should include the time at which the groups started coming, why they came, and how the community and government reacted.

Step 4: Students then write-up and present their findings in a poster presentation, PowerPoint presentation, or other form.

Summary

For those developing content-based courses, a good place to begin is to identify where on the continuum their course belongs. Every program has its own unique needs. Finding the definition that best fits the program will allow teachers to meet the needs of students and administration. Along with finding a workable definition, teachers also need to identify the challenges that will effect curriculum development. Some of these challenges may be universal throughout programs at different universities, such as student language proficiency, appropriate materials, and prior content knowledge of teachers. Other challenges may be unique to their own program. Thus, by defining content-based curriculum for their own specific program needs and considering the challenge within their own program context, teachers can develop an effective curriculum.

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Appendix 1

Refugee Vocabulary – Activity 1

Directions: Look at the words below and then write each word under the correct category. Some words may belong in more than one category.

- Asylum seeker Refugee Boat people
- Economics War Famine
- Politics Amnesty International Minority
- Race Red Cross Majority
- Religion Cross-border refugee Persecution
- Repression Cultural practices Internally displaced
- UNHCR

Causes	Organizations	Terms for People

Appendix 2

Vocabulary 2

English Word	Japanese Translation	Japanese translation in Romaji
Asylum Seeker	亡命希望者	Boumei kibousha
Economics	経済 (経済に関連した)	Keizai (keizai ni kanren shita)i
Politics	政治 (政治に関連した)	Seiji (seiji ni kanren shita)
Race	人種	Jinshu
Religion	宗教	Shukyo
Repression	抑圧	Yokuatsu
Refugee	難民	Nanmin
War	戦争 (争い)	Sensou (arasoi)
Amnesty International	アムネスティ・インターナショナル	政治犯救済や人権擁護のための国際委員 (A brief explanation of Amnesty Int'l. in Japanese)
Red Cross	赤十字(社)	Sekijyuji (sha)
Cross-border refugee	越境難民 越境してきた難民	Ekkyo nanmin; Ekkyo shitekita nanmin
Cultural practices	文化的な慣行 文化的実践	Bunkateki na; kankou Bunkateki jissen
UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)	国連難民高等弁務官 こくれん なんみん こうとう べんむかん	Kokuren nanmin kouto benmu kan
Boat People	ボート難民	Bouto nanmin
Famine	飢饉 (飢え)	Kikin (ue)
Minority	少数(派) (少数民族)	Shosu (ha) (shosu minzoku)
Majority	多数(派) (多数民族)	Tasu (ha) (tasu minzoku)
Persecution	迫害	Hakugai
Internally displaced	国内避難民	Kokunai hinanmin

Appendix 3

Refugees – Activity 2

Pre-reading Activity

Before looking at the *Refugees* map, discuss the questions below with a classmate and write down your own ideas

1. Make a list of places in the world where you think there are a large number of refugees.
2. Which countries in the following continents do you think host the most refugees?
 - Asia
 - Europe
 - North America
3. Which Asian country do you think has the most refugees?

Vocabulary

Cross-border refugees: people who leave their home countries by crossing the border into a neighboring country

Internally Displaced Persons: people who have fled their homes but stay in their own country.

Asylum Seekers: People who have fled across international borders

Skimming and Scanning

Now, look at the map and check your answers and then answer the following questions.

Refugee Map Facts

Fill out the information about the nationality of refugees that have fled to these countries:

Tanzania	USA	China
1. Burundi	1. 217,000	1.
2. 120,000	2.	2.
3.	3. Other	

1. T/F More than half of the 15 million cross-border refugees come from Palestine and Afghanistan.
2. T/F There are 22 million cross-border refugees and 15 million people displaced within their own countries.
3. T/F The highest number of refugees living in India come from Tibet.
4. T/F Japan hosts an estimated 5,000 – 9,000 refugees.
5. T/F Turkey has refugees mainly from Macedonia and Iraq.

Short Answers - For Mid /High Levels

1. What is the major problem with refugee camps?
2. What do rich countries prefer to do with refugees?
3. In what areas are there 100,000 plus internally displaced persons?
4. In Asia, how does Japan compare to other Asian nations as a host for refugees?
5. Why do you think that there is a big difference between the number of refugees living in Japan compared to countries like China and India?

Follow-up Project 1

See handouts “Human Rights and Refugees: The Right to Asylum,” and “Teacher Answers to Case Studies found on Handout # 44.”

Follow-up Project 2

Students identify refugee groups within their own community or country. They choose one group to research. Their research should include when the group started coming, why they came, and how the community and government reacted. Students then write-up and present their findings in a poster presentation, PowerPoint, or other form.