

A Content-based Approach to a High School Global Lesson for Students with Limited Proficiency

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Language is learned not because we want to talk, read, or write about language, but because we want to talk, read, and write about the world (Cazden, 1988). What is meaningful to the learners is not the language itself, but the information that is being transmitted. In this sense, a content-based approach cannot be separated from language teaching or learning. Unfortunately, however, some high school English textbooks, especially those written for students with limited language proficiency, are oversimplified and lacking depth. As a result, avoidance of complex sentence structure is common. Although the subject matter may be serious and requires careful consideration, the verbal texts become flat and uninteresting. This essay explores a content-based approach to a high school English textbook that deals with peace education. The ultimate goal of an English teacher is to develop student language skills, but we should also aim to nurture the whole person. One way to do this is to cultivate interests in global issues.

学習者の言語学習の目的は言語そのものよりもむしろ、言語が伝える内容を知ることにある。この点で題材の内容理解を中心に据えた言語教授法・学習法は不可欠である。しかし、実際には、学習者の言語能力が低い高校では平易で深みのない文章を読ませることにならざるを得ない。これは学習者の語彙が限られ、また、複雑な文章を避けるためである。その結果、題材は深刻だが内容は浅く面白くないものになってしまう。この小論では、学習者の国際問題への関心を養いつつ、言語能力を高めることを目的として、高校の英語Iの教科書の中の平和学習を扱った課への内容を重視した教授法の実践とその結果を紹介する。

Why are Global Issues included in language teaching?

A high school English I textbook I use at school includes 12 lessons, among which are four environmental issues, three human rights issues, and one war and peace topic. Why are so many global lessons included in a high school textbook? Generally speaking, secondary school students in Japan tend to be indifferent to world affairs because they have grown up in a materialistically self-centered and affluent society. The result is a general passivity with no clear vision of the future. It is most likely that world affairs are the least of their concerns.

Due to the development of media and IT, however, the world has become increasingly diverse and complex, and therefore, teaching secondary school students global issues through English is becoming more significant. In Japanese secondary schools, textbooks play a key role in providing input for learning and there are quite number of lessons dealing with war, peace, and related issues. If English textbooks are to be the first, and sometimes the only, medium by which students encounter global issues, educators are responsible for introducing students to meaningful texts. Cates ascribes four dimensions to a global education approach: knowledge, skills,

attitudes, and action (Cates, 1990). These dimensions can become key factors in planning lessons to encourage the development of our language students to become socially responsible world citizens.

Why is a content-based approach effective?

Some high school English textbooks, especially those written for students with limited language proficiency, are too graded and lack depth. As a result, even though the subject matter, such as nuclear issues, is serious and needs careful consideration, the verbal texts give only a little information or oversimplify the facts. This is where a content-based approach becomes effective. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (2003) suggest that using simplified texts does students a disservice. The selection of a convoluted, poorly written text does them an equal disservice. It is challenging for teachers to provide authentic content material. However, the students will be able to move on to developing a greater understanding of the context using a variety of skills within a meaningful context. This is one dynamic of learning, and a path to life-long learning.

Background Research

Survey analysis

A survey (see Appendix 1) was conducted to gauge student familiarity with the textbook subject matter. In this case, the subject matter focused on a Hiroshima atomic bomb victim and a Kazakhstani girl handicapped as a result of nuclear testing. The participants were 79 first year students in the Social Welfare Department.

The results show the indifference of students to the target issue, as well as the influence of mass media. The first question was “What do you think about when you hear the word ‘Hiroshima’?” Multiple answers were allowed. Student responses indicated that “Hiroshima” reminded them of the atomic bomb (83%), *Okonomiyaki*, the local specialty (10%), war (7%), the Hiroshima Carp Baseball Team (7%), nuclear issues (1%), and others. The second question asked was “Have you heard of Kazakhstan?” Half of the students answered that they had heard of “Kazakhstan”, but the fact is that they seemed to have mistaken it for Afghanistan, and therefore associated Kazakhstan with landmines or wars.

In answering Question 3, “What countries do you think possess nuclear weapons?” 48 students identified North Korea, followed by the USA (21), Russia (9), Iraq (7), China (6), Afghanistan (3), and UK (3). Again they associated Afghanistan with war, and therefore, with nuclear weapons. The final question, “What you think you can do for a nuclear-free world?” seemed to have been too challenging for most of the students. Some responded that they should appeal to the UN in order to create a nuclear-free society, but most of them wrote nothing.

Textbook analysis

The target text here is “We’ve Had Enough” in *Viva! English I* (Minamimura, T., Kadoyama, A., Shirai, H., Noda, T., Hiraoka, H., Moriyama, Y., et al., 2003), which consists of a reading section followed by comprehension questions and a grammar section. It starts with the introduction of Sadako Sasaki. The first two paragraphs describe the life of Sadako Sasaki, an atomic bomb victim. The sentences are short and

the explanation is brief, but there are a lot of crucial facts omitted about her life and death. Considering that 86% of the students had not even heard her name, the teachers need to present background information regarding the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and why Sadako Sasaki is the focus in the unit of study. The information following the introduction does not disclose much about how she suffered and why she “moved many people” (Minamimura, T., et al. 2003, p.50).

The transition to the introduction of the case of Renata Izmailova is rather abrupt. Although the map provided underneath in the text assists student understanding, the sentence, “We have another Sadako now in Kazakhstan” (Minamimura, T. et al., 2003, p.50) makes readers wonder what this means, especially when many of the students do not know exactly where Kazakhstan is. Also the readers would wonder what Sadako has to do with Renata. Likewise the last sentence: “Her growth has almost stopped because of the tests” (Minamimura, T. et al., 2003, p.50) definitely needs more explanation.

The latter half of the text describes Renata’s life. Again because of the simple sentence patterns, the context sounds superficial. The readers would wonder what makes Renata “fight for her life” (Minamimura, T. et al., 2003, p.51). The last three paragraphs report her visit to Japan, and introduce her poem. Still the relationship between Renata and Sadako Sasaki remains unclear. The readers can assume that Renata visited Hiroshima from the photo on the next page, but not much else is apparent. The poem at the end of the text is a description of the nuclear bomb tests in the site neighboring Renata’s village, and the last sentence is used as the title of this lesson. Because the poem is too short, it is difficult

to affirm that “Her message is love and peace to all human beings” (Minamimura, T. et al., 2003, p.51).

Thus, although two important themes are dealt with, only the simple stories of two girls are provided for the students to read. It is necessary for teachers to consider giving more depth and meaning to global issue lessons. The following section describes an experimented teaching plan focusing on the content.

One Unit-Based Sample Teaching Plan

Here is an experimental teaching plan which I used with to my students.

Target students

First year high school students at a vocational school in Saitama. The students belong to the Social Welfare Department. These students are supposed to be training to become care workers in nursing homes upon graduation from high school. They are interested in subjects like nursing and medical care for the elderly, but not in general subjects like English or math.

Goals

- 1) Students will develop language skills while exploring global issues.
- 2) Students will think critically about current world issues
- 3) Students will exhibit empathy and develop broadmindedness towards issues in this unit as a possible means towards becoming good world citizens.

Teaching plans

The following is a unit-based teaching plan. The expected time-frame is six 50 minute class periods over a two-week span.

Class	Content
First	Introduction to nuclear issues and comprehension of the text
Second & third	Reading the text and learning the grammar points
Fourth	“Let’s know more about nuclear issues” A content-based approach to the subject matter
Fifth	Guest lecture session / Research session
Sixth	Planning and presenting

The first, second, and third periods are more regular English classes from the perspective of covering the same material as other English teachers. The fourth, fifth, and sixth periods are examples of a content-based approach to the topic. Let me highlight the fourth period in the following section and show an experimental content-based class. The fifth period is either a guest lecture session, or a research session. For the guest lecturer session, a social studies teacher is invited to talk about the background of nuclear issues including the cold war. In the research session,

students go to the school library or the computer room to research questions they have come across in the previous period. Finally the sixth period is a round-up session. Students work as groups and think about ways to create a nuclear-free world. First they brain-storm, plan actions by drawing web-diagrams, and present their results in class to their classmates and teacher.

An Experimental Content-Based Lesson on Nuclear Issues

The following is a content-based lesson, implemented to focus on expanding knowledge about nuclear weapons through activities.

Fourth Lesson: Let’s know more about nuclear issues**Objectives**

- 1) Students will look at the world map and identify the countries that have developed nuclear arms.
- 2) Students will find out the destructive power of nuclear weapons.
- 3) Students will practice using the target grammar structure.

Materials

A blank world map, colored pencils, and handouts: Handout 1— Nuclear Numbers (see Appendix 2) is available through <www.ceip.org/files/nonprolif/Numbers/default.asp>;

Handout—A blank world map; Handout 3—Express your opinion (see Appendix 3); Handout 4—a Sankichi Toge poem (see Appendix 4) is available through <www.bu-assist.co.jp/poem/titiokaese.htm>.

N.B. The materials that students need to use only once (Handouts 1 and 4) can be made on stiff card or laminated and collected at the end of the lesson for use with other classes over the years, which aptly demonstrates the teachers' concern for the environment.

Procedure

Step 1: Compare & contrast. Students are given the survey results and, in small groups, compare the answers with the facts.

Step 2: Geography activity. The students are given blank world maps and Handout 1: *Nuclear Numbers*. They find the countries listed on the table and color them on the map according a key indicating the total number of suspected nuclear weapons.

Step 3: Math activity. The students calculate the number of people that can be killed with these weapons.

Step 4: Language activity. Students work in small groups to express their opinions regarding what they have learned in this class, or in the previous reading class, using the *S+V+that* clause sentence pattern which they learned in the previous lesson; i.e., *I think (that)...., I have found (that)...*

Step 5: Consolidation. The students will complete the language task as written homework. As reading homework for the following day's activities, they will also be assigned to read a poem by Sankichi Toge, a poet who survived the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

Outcome

Unlike textbook driven classes, content-based instruction seems to have been perceived as fun by the students. It also allowed for a number of teacher observations. The first was that the students became absorbed in working with the world map. Some students were coloring elaborately, and others were jotting down the names of the countries both in English and Japanese. The teacher overheard them talking about global issues such as the US presidential election and Chechnya while they were coloring. Another teacher observation was that some learners who are generally slow in understanding the requirements of their language classes were quick in the calculation activity. The teacher also noted that cooperative learning worked well not only for the geography and math tasks, but also for the language task. The students discussed what they would like to write and were helping one another in groups. One group divided the roles such as consulting the dictionary, or checking grammar, and everyone was contributing to the composition in one way or the other.

Alternatives

The following activities explain a number of other ways to introduce and expand knowledge about nuclear issues.

Jig-saw reading

Effects of a Nuclear Weapon on a Target: Blast, Terminal Radiation, Initial Nuclear Radiation, and Fallout (available through <www.nrdc.org/knuclearweapons/effectstarget>)

Students are divided into groups of four to make home groups. One of each group goes to the *specialist* group and reads the assigned article. Then they go back to their home group and report what they have learned to the rest of their group.

Reciting/Acting

Ahara, S., Hori, Y., & Sagar, H. (1995). *Habatake Senbazuru: Peace Cranes*. Tokyo: Sanyusha. There are some side readers published for secondary school students related to this topic. These graded books take on the style of scripts. Students can recite, or act out, and learn the language through a drama. This activity not only improves speaking and articulation but also stimulates student empathy toward the atomic bomb victims.

Writing poems

Toge, S. (1977). *Hiroshima Poems*. (R. Jackaman, D. Logan, & T. Shioda Trns.). Tokyo: Sanyusha. Students not only read, but also write, poems. Ideally this activity inspires them to form their ideas about a nuclear-free world.

Conclusion

A content-based approach starts with unlocking the interests of students. The choice of themes, text types and activities affects student motivation. This idea parallels Gardner's (1993) "Multiple Intelligences Model," which views natural human talents as significant assets to be applied to education. Furthermore, group activities suggested the effectiveness of

cooperative learning. Students learn not only from teachers and textbooks, but from peers, and establish a healthy social relationship while engaging themselves in group work. In a content-based language class, teachers are responsible for providing rich context while creating a cooperative learning atmosphere in class. This is also a basis for nurturing life-long learners.

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Appendix 1

アンケート

次の質問はこれから勉強するLesson 11 We've Had Enough! の内容に関係するものです。知っていることを書いてください。

1. ヒロシマと聞いて思いつくことはどんなことですか。

What do you think about when you hear the word "Hiroshima"?

2. 佐々木禎子という人の名前を聞いたことがありますか

Have you heard the name of Sadako Sasaki?

3. カザフスタンという国名を聞いたことがありますか。また、この国について知っていることを書いてください。

Have you heard of the country named "Kazakhstan"? Write what you know about this country.

4. 核爆弾を持っていると思われる国を挙げてください。

What countries do you think possess nuclear weapons?

5. 核のない世界にするには、あなたはどんなことができると思いますか。

What do you think you can do to make a nuclear-free world?

Questionnaire Results

1. What do you think about when you heard "Hiroshima"?

Atomic Bomb	66 (83%)
<i>Okonomiyaki</i> , a local delicacy	8 (10%)
The Hiroshima Carp	6 (7%)
War	1 (1%)

2. Have you heard the name of Sadako Sasaki?

Yes: 11 (14%); No: 68 (86%)

3. Have you hear of Kazakhstan?

Yes: 39 (50%); No: 40 (50%)

Write what you know about Kazakhstan?

Landmines, War, Poor, etc.

4. What countries do you think posses nuclear weapons?

North Korea	48 (61%)
USA	21 (26%)
Russia	9 (11%)
Iraq	7 (8%)
China	6 (7%)
Afghanistan	3 (4%)
UK	3 (4%)

5. What do you think you can do in order to make a nuclear-free world?

Two people wrote that people should appeal to the United Nations for making a nuclear-free world. The rest wrote nothing.

Appendix 2

Country	Number of nuclear weapons
United States	~10,000
Russia	~17,000
China	410
France	~350
United Kingdom	200
Israel	~100
India	~70
Pakistan	44
World Total	~28,170

N.B. This table was created using data retrieved from <www.ceip.org/files/nonprolif/Numbers/default.asp>.

Appendix 3

Express Your Opinion

本文を読んで、また、核兵器の分布地図を見て、わかったこと・考えたことを例に挙げた表現をつかって書いてみよう。

Examples

I believe that has nuclear weapons.

(私は … が核兵器を持っていると思う)

I have found that.....

(私は……とわかった)

I think that Sadako/Renata was.....

(私は貞子 / レナタが …..と思う)

I hope that

(私は…….といいと思う) (私は…….ということを望む)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

1年 組 番・氏名

Appendix 4

ちちをかえせ ははをかえせ
 としよりをかえせ こどもをかえせ
 わたしをかえせ わたしにつながる
 にんげんをかえせ
 にんげんの にんげんのよのあるかぎり
 くすれぬへいわを
 へいわをかえせ

Give Me Back My Father
 Give me back my father, give me back my mother,
 Give back the old,
 Give back the children.
 Give me back myself, give back
 all people who are part of me.
 For as long as this world is a human world,
 Give me peace,
 Give me peace that will last.