

Content-Based Instruction and World Heritage Sites

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Content-Based Instruction (CBI) in university teaching contexts has been an ongoing area of interest for English instructors in Japan. This study, based on open-ended qualitative data from 75 higher proficiency learners at a private university in Japan, explored the relationship of a CBI course centered around world heritage sites and self-reported gains in skills, confidence, and feelings towards the content. The study found positive learner gains for communication skills, increased confidence in giving opinions, and a greater interest in wanting to visit and study more about world heritage sites. However, it is difficult to determine if the content itself was responsible for the gains, or whether the collaborative structure of the course influenced the findings.

近年、日本の大学での英語指導に於いて、コンテンツ・ベース教授法 (CBI) への関心が高まっている。本論文では、ある私立大学にて、75人の英語レベル上級者に対し、実際に行った授業の感想文を基に、CBIの有効性を述べる。当授業では、「世界遺産」をテーマに行ったが、授業を通して、学習者はコミュニケーション能力、意見交換における能力と自信、発表能力、また、世界遺産に関する知識と多大な興味を得ることができた。ただし、それらの能力の取得は、授業内容によるものか、共同活動によって得たものか結論を出すのは困難である。

Literature Review

Theoretical underpinnings of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) in second language acquisition contexts have been well established (Grabe & Stoller, 1997), but empirical research, especially in university contexts in Japan, is surprisingly limited. The CBI focus in the literature has predominately been on how to implement CBI in EFL contexts (Butler, 2005), CBI approaches and methodology (Murphey, 1997), and CBI immersion models (Snow, 2001). Crocker and Bowden (2011) argue for the advantage of designing a CBI course centered around critical thinking skills, while Takahashi and Shucart (2009) reflect on their experiences introducing science-fiction movies to their students in the science department of a private Japanese university. In another instance, International Relations majors at a different university were taught content on human rights issues such as refugees (Clemans, Hansford, & Brooks, 2005). In all cases however, qualitative research was not carried out to see the impact of the content on learner gains.

Recently, the focus has been on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an approach to merging content instruction with language learning (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).



CLIL-based courses feature a 4C framework which includes content, communication, cognition, and community.

This paper will look at world heritage sites as a basis for a content class in a private Japanese university. The research questions to be asked are as follows:

1. Will the learners respond positively to the course content?
2. What role will the content play in learner improvement of skills, confidence, and feelings towards World Heritage sites?

Method

Participants

The participants ($n = 75$) were mostly second-year students with an average TOEFL score of 469 ($SD = 37.5$). The class was offered during the first, second, and third periods, with an average of 25 learners per class.

Course Background

The course was offered as a compulsory elective in the School of Policy Studies at a large private university in western Japan. Learners were required to take one English content-based course in addition to their other English classes (presentation, writing, and oral communication). Learners could choose from among the following topics: Cultural awareness, business English, the television show *Galactica*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and World Heritage sites. All classes were taught in English and learners were expected to use English as the primary form of communication in the classroom. The course met once a week for 90 minutes for a total of 14 classes in the semester. Learners also took compulsory courses outside of the English program related to their major, but since there is no specific

course covering World Heritage sites among these classes, a washback effect is unlikely.

Course Description

Learners were required to choose a partner (or group of three) in the second class of the semester and work with the same group for the duration of the term, choosing one World Heritage site outside of Japan to study in-depth. A focus on countries other than Japan was made in order to encourage the students to do their information gathering in English. Some of the sites that learners chose included the Grand Canyon, Auschwitz, Fujian Tulou, Potala Palace, and Nemrut Dag, among others. Sites were assigned on a first-come, first-served basis and the same two sites could not be chosen among any of the groups enrolled across the three different sections.

The 14-week semester was divided into two parts. The first six weeks were reserved for learners to research the basic information about their site, such as history, access, sightseeing information, tourism data, admission costs, and selection criteria. In week seven, learners led a 20-minute discussion with other classmates to present their research and to answer questions from learners. This discussion will be detailed in the assessment section below. Learners continued their research on their same world heritage site in weeks eight through eleven, but this time were required to investigate problems or issues affecting their particular site, and to propose solutions to these problems. In week 12, learners led another 20-minute discussion about the problems and solutions of their site. The following week, the focus of the class was on world heritage sites in Japan. First, learners studied about the current sites in Japan and then worked with their partner to recommend future sites to be added to Japan's world heritage list. The final class was devoted to a course wrap-up and review.

The idea behind this course was that each learner would become an expert on one World Heritage site of their choice, by researching and sharing information with their group. The first half of the course was designed to develop basic research and reading skills to be used in the first 20-minute discussion, while the second half of the course focused more on evaluative and critical reading by having learners focus on problems and policy issues with their World Heritage site. This course progression and scaffolding of research tasks was deliberate in order for learners to not only learn practical information about their site, but also to develop important reading and critical thinking skills they could apply to other courses in the future.

A typical class was structured as follows. The first 45 minutes to one hour covered a number of issues related to world heritage sites including selection criteria, the nomination process, the in-danger list, and preservation of sites. These activities generally entailed a combination of teacher-led presentations, pair-work designed for deeper thinking and understanding, discussion questions about the issue at hand, and specific issues related to their own World Heritage site they had chosen. The remainder of the 90-minute class was devoted to group work in which learners shared their internet research and homework with their partner, using worksheets that were designed to assist them in this process. The teacher walked around the room and met with each group separately to address problems and to answer questions. See Appendix A for an example of one of the worksheets.

Course Assessment

The main assessment criterion in the course was the two graded discussions, which accounted for 50% of the class grade. The other half of the course grade was divided between homework assignments, class participation, and written course feedback. The following is a summary of the course assessment breakdown:

- 10% Class participation
- 50% Graded discussion (2)
- 35% Homework assignments
- 5% Written course feedback

Graded Discussions

The discussions lasted the entire 90-minute class period, with each group member leading a 20-minute talk on their world heritage site. First, the class was divided into groups of three or four people, with each person representing a different world heritage site. Learners were required to lead their discussions separately from their partner in order to assure fair grading. Thus, if a pair researched about Jerusalem, for example, then each member would present their information and be assessed independently from their partner. During the first discussion (week seven), each participant could use an A4-sized discussion sheet with key words written about their site. In addition, learners were required to make an A3-sized visual sheet with pictures, maps, and other information that would help them present their information clearly. For the second discussion (week 12), learners were asked to make an A4-sized handout outlining the major problems facing their world heritage site, along with proposed solutions to those problems.

Learners were not assessed on their English ability. Instead, the criteria for assessment included topic knowledge (10%), depth of research (10%), confidence (10%), presentation flow (10%), visual aids (20%), discussion sheet (20%), and discussion questions (20%). This was done for a couple of reasons. First, since this was a second-year class with an average TOEFL score of 469, the learners have a good foundation of basic English communication skills. Second, by focusing on skills other than English ability, learners who experience high anxiety when

speaking a foreign language would not be punished if they had done adequate research and preparation for the discussion.

Written Course Feedback

In order to assess benefits and drawbacks of the course, learners were required to submit a 500-word written homework assignment in English soliciting their feedback about the class. The assignment was worth 5% of their course grade, and learners would receive full marks for submitting the assignment as long as it followed the proper formatting. The assignment was completely open-ended, and learners could write their thoughts about the class based on a number of different example questions. Learners were given two weeks to complete the assignment. See Appendix B for the instructions that were given to the learners.

Procedure

The results of the open-ended feedback were analyzed using a typological approach as outlined by Hatch (2002). This approach involves first setting up some categories for study, followed by collecting and analyzing the data to look for patterns and relationships that conform to these categories. In this case, the typologies of gains in skills, confidence, and feelings were set up prior to data collection. First the data were read and coded for salient instances which supported the categories under study. Then, relationships within each typology were analyzed in order to find similar patterns. Next, the patterns were written up as one-sentence generalizations, followed by excerpts from the data that supported these generalizations. A summary of the findings can be found in the following section.

Results

Overall Impressions

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. A total of 72 of 75 (96%) learners completed the written course feedback, and 100% of the learners had something positive to say about the course.

Skills

There were 49 instances (65%) of self-reported learner increases in skills, which was an implicit goal of the class. The largest category involved increases in online research skills. Out of those 49, a total of 15 learners reported gains in research abilities, which typically followed this pattern:

This class made me improve my researching skill. When I researched my world heritage site, I had to read a lot of English article. Thanks to it, I reviewed important skills which had learned in reading class, or skim reading and scan reading. In addition to it, this task of researching have me opportunity that I had to reflect what interesting information for other student is. It was difficult for me to do so, but thinking deeply was effective and interesting for me.

The next most commonly reported skill regarded changes in discussion skills, of which 11 instances were found. They followed this pattern:

In addition, discussion in English with other students was useful to improve my English skills. In daily life, I do not have chance to discuss with other people in English so the discussion in English was good opportunity to discuss in English.

A total of ten instances of increased speaking skills were noted, which followed this pattern:

In addition, you can develop your English skills, because this class has two discussions. In the discussion, you have to explain your information, and have to make a lot of follow-up questions. So your skill will become better.

Another salient skill involved self-reported ability to explain things. Seven instances were noted, which typically followed this pattern:

I think I could get some skills in the class. These are English skill, ability of explaining thing which people do not know well, the various world situation or affairs, and so on.

Gains in the importance of group work were also noted. A total of seven instances occurred, which generally followed this pattern:

This lesson also improved my English ability. At the beginning of this class, I was nervous to talk with my classmate but through some pair or group work, gradually I got used to speak in front of people. It is very good thing for me because I was not good at doing do.

Finally, a total of six learners reported gains in presentation skills, which generally followed this pattern:

We can learn how we should speak if we want audience to have more interests about our topics. Only to learn about our topics is not goal, so after researching, we have to tell other people. Therefore, if people are interested in World Heritage Sites and also want to get the skill to introduce something more effectively, I recommend this class.

The remainder of the instances included self-reported gains in reading, listening, problem solving, sharing opinions, eye contact, and study skills.

Confidence

There were 14 instances (19%) of learner reported increases in confidence. The most common area for gains in confidence occurred in the category of confidence in giving opinions. There were a total of five instances, generally following this pattern:

I would recommend this class to other students because you can experience many things you didn't have before such as discussion and presentation. You will get more confidence on speaking out your opinions.

The remainder of the instances included gains in confidence for expressing feelings, lowering anxiety, giving presentations, and confidence in speaking English.

Feelings

There were 49 instances (65%) of learner reported increases in positive feelings. The most common area for increases occurred in the category of interest in World Heritage sites. There were a total of 20 instances, generally following this pattern:

Before the class, I did not have so much interest in World Heritage, but after this class, I really want to go to World Heritage sites. It is thanks to this class.

There were also five instances in which learners looked forward to attending each class. They generally followed this pattern:

When I asked you a question, you always have me good advice. I could relax in the class, but of course I learned a lot. Every week I was looking forward to the class. Thanks to this class, now I am more interested in World Heritage sites than before, so I want to visit many places.

The remainder of the instances involved learners increased feelings about wanting to improve English skills, a strong desire to do volunteer work, and feelings for wanting to take this class again.

Overlap

There were a number of instances in which there was an overlap in gains between all three of the typologies, as reflected in the following example:

When the graded discussion was coming, I spent much more time practicing and preparing. Every time I had a graded discussion, I realized how poor my English abilities were, which motivated me very much. The graded discussions were very hard but I felt strong confidence in myself after finishing them.

Discussion

In terms of answering the first research questions, it appears that the learners responded positively to the world heritage content. A clear majority of the learners gave written course feedback, even though they would likely not fail the course if they did not turn in the assignment, as the written course feedback was only 5% of their grade. The three learners who did not submit this course feedback assignment did not fail the course.

This positive response to the course could have been affected by the nature of the feedback. Since the feedback was not anonymous and it was assessed, learners could have felt pressure to write positive things about the class. In addition, it is difficult to determine if learners were responding positively to the course content, or the course framework itself.

The second research question can be evaluated by examining the typologies in the student reflections. The most salient

typology appears to be self-reported gains in skills. The most commonly reported gain was in research skills, which may be explained by the emphasis on gathering, consolidating, and presenting information about world heritage sites. The homework for each class commonly required learners to search for certain aspects of their world heritage site, and to share the results with their partner in the following class. When learners had difficulty finding information about their site, the teacher was there to offer advice that would guide them in successfully retrieving the information.

The second most commonly reported gain was in discussion skills, which can be explained by the focus of the course on discussion. Since there were two graded discussions that accounted for half of the course grade, students may have placed their priority in adequately preparing and practicing for the high-stakes assessment, which could account for the self-reported gains in discussion abilities.

Next were gains in speaking skills, which could also be attributed to the graded discussions. In addition to the assessed discussions, classroom activities were implemented in each class to encourage learners to give their opinions in English about different aspects of world heritage sites. While learners were sharing their research in groups, some learners attempted to continue speaking in English, even though the use of L1 was allowed. This could help explain why some learners may have reported increased gains in speaking skills.

The increased skill for explaining things could also be related to the graded discussions, since learners were in charge of presenting information about their world heritage sites to other students. Listeners were encouraged to ask comprehension questions when they did not understand, which may have prompted presenters to explain areas of their site in more detail.

Gains in the importance of group work are likely attributable to the cooperative nature of the class, in which learners were

required to work with their partner each class for the entire semester. Learners were allowed complete autonomy for choosing their group members, which may have had an impact on their positive experiences. Learners were not allowed to change group members and had to work through any issues or problems on their own.

Increased confidence in presentation skills might also be attributed to the graded discussions. Learners were encouraged to use eye contact with their group members when explaining their world heritage site, and learners were assessed on confidence and flow of their explanations, which may have helped with their confidence since it was a portion of their grade.

There appears to be some overlap between gains in different skills, as increases in discussion skills may have a positive effect on speaking skills and vice versa. In fact, one could argue that all of the above skills could fall under the umbrella of communication skills.

It appears that learner reported gains in confidence were not as salient as expected, as there were only 14 instances of learners noting increases in confidence. This could be due to the higher proficiency of the learners. Since the average TOEFL score was 469 at the start of the course, participants may already have had a high level of English confidence before the course commenced. This is only a summary, since confidence was not assessed during the semester.

Finally, gains in positive feelings could be attributed to a well-suited match between the content and the learners' own interests. Some specifically chose the course because of prior interest in the subject matter, while others became more interested in world heritage sites during the duration of the course. This high level of interest may also be related to the nature of the course as a required elective. Learners could choose this course from among four other classes, which may have discouraged uninterested learners from enrolling.

However, in terms of both research questions, it is difficult to discern whether the course content itself was the cause for these gains, or whether the course framework had a role to play. In other words, if the structured nature of the course, where students worked together collaboratively to gather and consolidate information had a major impact on their positive experiences in the class, then the connection between the World Heritage content and positive effects is unclear.

Weaknesses and Further Research

There are a couple of weaknesses in the research that need addressing. First, the results of the open-ended feedback could have been handled differently. The lack of anonymity is an issue that may have affected the quality of the data. If the feedback were completely anonymous and not assessed as part of the grade for the course, then the results could have been different. The only way to determine this is to replicate this study with this weakness in mind and compare the results. Second, self-reported increases in gains is not necessarily proof of improvement, as it is only the learners' interpretation of what has been gained. A more appropriate research tool would be to include a questionnaire or an in-depth discourse analysis to determine if there are any statistically significant findings. Furthermore, perhaps some kind of cloze test could be designed to more accurately determine knowledge gains in World Heritage content, and pre and post test results could be compared.

In order to determine if the structure of the course itself played a role in learner gains, perhaps a comparative analysis could be conducted between a traditional teacher-fronted lecture class on World Heritage sites and this collaborative-based course framework.

Using World Heritage sites as content for university-level English classes appears to be promising, but follow-up research

is necessary to determine the effectiveness of this approach to language instruction.

Bio Data

Wes Lang holds a Master's Degree in TESOL from Temple University and has been teaching English to a variety of learners in the Kansai area over the last 11 years. His research interests include Content-Based Instruction and Task-based Language Learning.

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Appendix A

Example Research Activity

Project status

Work with your partner/group. Decide what information you have and what other information you need. Also, try to decide what kinds of pictures you want to include on the A3-size visual sheet.

Information we have:	Information we need: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interesting fact
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Visuals to look for:

- Do you think the class was easier than other EC classes or more difficult? Why?

You don't have to answer all of these questions. They are just some of the things you can write about. I want you to tell me your honest opinion about this class. Your grade will not be affected by what you write. I need your opinions so I can make this class better in the future.

Appendix B**Open-Ended Writing Assignment for Learners**

Please write a 500-word essay about this class. This is not an academic essay, but more of a journal type assignment. The essay should be typed, following formatting from writing class. The essay is due on the last day of class (July 14) and is worth 5% of your grade.

When you write, please think about the following questions:

- What did you like / dislike about this class?
- What did you learn in this class?
- Were you happy that you took this class? Why or why not?
- Did you like working with the same partner the entire semester, or did you want to work with other partners?
- If you were the teacher, what would you change about this class?
- Did you enjoy researching about your World Heritage site? Was it easy? Difficult?
- Do you think this class had too much homework?
- What grade do you think you will get in this class? Why?
- How long did you spend doing research for this class?
- Would you recommend this class to other students? Why or why not?
- How can the teacher make this class better?