

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Freshman academic skills and teacher collaboration

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Reference data:

Naoumi, E. J. & Suzuki, M. (2009). Freshmen academic skills and teacher collaboration. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

We present a short case study of how academic skills were incorporated into content-based instruction (CBI) classes, taught collaboratively by a British English teacher and a Japanese English teacher in a university foreign language program for 2 years (2006-2007). The balance between content and language has long been a major issue in content-based instruction (Snow & Brinton, 1997); however, as yet, there are few studies which examine what actually occurs in CBI classes and how the students perceive them. This study suggests that collaboration between a native English speaking teacher, teaching a theme-based CBI course, and a non-native English teacher, with the same native language, teaching a strategy-based CBI course, is one way of achieving a better balance in CBI and better meeting the future academic needs of freshman English majors. This collaboration has implications for CBI program development. We give an overview of pertinent issues, and describe the teaching context, the development of the collaboration, and how the student perceptions of the course were obtained. We then describe our experiences in more detail. We conclude with some suggestions for further research to stimulate further discussion about future CBI program development.

この論文では、日本の大学の外国語学部英語学科で半期づつ同じクラスをペアで教えたイギリス人のネイティブの教師と日本人の非ネイティブ教師が、「コンテンツ中心のアプローチ」を用いた2年間(2006年~2007年)の授業で、協力しながら、「学問的目的の英語教育」を発展させていった過程を報告する。また学生の授業記録や授業評価に基づき、学生の視点からもこの授業を分析する。「コンテンツ中心教授法」においては、内容と言語教育のバランスをどのように保つかが絶えず問題となる(Snow & Brinton, 1997)。この問題を克服するため、二人の教師は、お互いに協力し合いながら、一人は、言語学習のストラテジー中心の基礎的な授業を、またもう一人は、テーマ重視の応用的な授業を実施した。この経験はネイティブおよび非ネイティブの二人の教師にとって大変有意義なものであったので、この論文をきっかけに、さらなる実証研究や議論が今後活発に行われることが期待される。



Changes in university curricula and the opportunity to teach new courses enable teachers to develop by reflecting on their teaching and conducting research into new areas of pedagogy. The implementation of a content-based instruction (CBI) program for freshmen at a Japanese university offered two teachers such an opportunity. In the program, they were assigned to teach two different content classes to two groups of students per semester and had to work together to give each student a grade at the end of the semester. One native speaking (NS) English teacher, born and educated to the tertiary level in the UK with language learning experiences in European languages and Japanese, chose to teach a theme-based course and the other teacher, a non-native speaking (NNS) English teacher, born and educated in Japan to the tertiary level with an additional four-year postgraduate study in an English speaking academic environment, chose to teach a strategy-based course. Several issues are pertinent to this study.

One issue is that the inclusion of ‘content’ in language courses has from the very beginning raised the question of how to balance the attraction of teaching content with the need to teach language skills and to pay attention to form. If emphasis is placed too much on content, students often revert to their first language to process it, but if the emphasis is too much on form, the opportunities for learning offered by content are lost. Achieving such balance is an ongoing challenge for all teachers involved in courses in Content-Based Instruction (CBI) contexts (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003; Stoller, 2008). The combination of theme-based and strategy-based CBI courses described in this paper may be one way forward particularly for academic skills for freshmen with very different learning experiences.

Strategies have been identified and analyzed in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language education since the 1980s (Oxford, 1990; Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Macaro, 2006; Manchon, 2006). Among strategy researchers there seems to be a consensus that strategy use is closely related to success in language learning. Furthermore, recent literature suggests the importance of strategy instruction in SLA. According to Cohen (2003), strategy use can be facilitated by providing learners with effective language learning tasks.

Early on in the program both teachers independently recognized the need to provide the students with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction, an important factor in their collaboration. Jordan (1997, p. 44) enumerates the academic skills as “listening and speaking in seminars, academic writing, and listening, with understanding, and note taking in lectures.” According to Jordan, students experience difficulties in formulating ideas quickly in seminars, unwittingly plagiarize as novice writers and have poor note-taking skills during research and lectures. CBI for freshmen, particularly the theme-based course in this paper (see Table 2) is one way to better prepare students for the challenges identified by Jordan.

Collaboration between the two teachers is an important theme in this paper because preparation for CBI courses and portfolio evaluation impose burdens on already busy teachers. Here, the different linguistic backgrounds of the two speakers are one factor in the collaborative experience that needs to be taken into account. One model of collaboration between NS and NNS teachers (Matsuda, 1999) describes a teaching situation in which

they regarded each other as a complementary resource, but that collaboration needs individual teachers' "strong self-initiative and willingness to cooperate with others" (Matsuda, p. 1). Another important area is addressing the factors that inhibit collaboration. Crookes (1997) describes how factors such as the building layout of the educational site and tight schedules can cause difficulties in interaction between teachers.

This combination of theme-based/strategy-based CBI in one semester, the opportunities for teacher collaboration with an extra NS/NNS dimension, and mutual recognition of the need for the incorporation of academic skills at the freshman level in the CBI in a Japanese university context was a positive experience for both teachers. They felt that a combination of theme-based/strategy-based CBI was a rich learning environment for their students and their model of active collaboration offered opportunities for teacher development. Consequently, both teachers reflected upon their experiences as a first step toward identifying areas for further systematic research. Next some discussion of the teaching context is required.

Teaching context

In the CBI program, the students studied in two mandatory content classes taught by two different teachers per semester. The number of students in the classes varied from about 26 to 30 and the students were streamed according to a test administered at the beginning of the year. The exposure to different themes taught by different teachers was incorporated to motivate the students and mark their transition from high school.

At the beginning of the new program, all teachers were given guidelines and sample materials to establish which common elements should be incorporated in all classes in order to lessen student confusion and to foster continuity in the program as a whole. The guidelines suggested that the content lectures be kept to about 10 minutes, student interaction with the content be maximized through pair work and group work activities as well as quizzes and projects, and that students should reflect on their own learning at the end of the class by writing in an action log each week. All work was to be kept by the students in a portfolio and handed in for evaluation at the end of the course.

Student perceptions of the course are drawn from their action logs, self-evaluations and evaluation questionnaires in Japanese administered by the university and in English by the program coordinator. One disadvantage of the questionnaires was that they were for both courses and sometimes it was difficult to know which course the student was commenting on. Nevertheless, this was a rich source of student comment for the teachers to use in course refinement and collaborative discussions.

At first, the two teachers in this paper met at the end of the semester to discuss the student grades. As the teachers began to collaborate more closely, they began to exchange information during breaks and actively discuss the problematic areas in both classes that both teachers could address in different ways. The next two sections describe the theme-based and strategy courses in more detail.

Theme-based course

Content

From experience of other CBI courses, the teacher identified the need for content that was challenging, but if relatively unknown to the students, could yield interesting research results quite quickly for novice researchers. The topic chosen was “An Introduction to Africa.” With a few exceptions, Japanese students know very little about Africa but because of its connections with the music they enjoy for example, they quickly develop an interest. The weekly topics are very broad but because the students know so little about Africa they can remain broad and thus the burden of interaction with content is less. As a research project, the students choose one country to research in depth and they research a different aspect each week before putting it together as a report at the end.

Table 1. Table of contents for the course An Introduction to Africa

Week	Lecture topic	Student research topic: An African country
Week 1	Why study about Africa?	General information
Week 2	African history and languages	A famous figure
Week 3	African problems	Problems
Week 4	African music	Music and musicians
Week 5	Africa's future	Places to visit
Week 6	Jumbo Quiz	In class presentation of report

Student comments (replicated in the original form) confirmed the choice of Africa for a theme-based course. For the majority of students, interest in Africa increases as their research progresses and they begin to understand the lectures better as comments by two students show:

First I didn't know anything about Africa. But because of this class I got to know and have fun ...

This class made me to get more knowledgeable. I started to know how important that Japanese people are lucky. We have money to eat, have a place to sleep and lots of shopping malls.

Only two students during the 2-year period criticized the topic and said that they wanted to study countries like Canada or the United States.

Materials for theme-based CBI classes are usually created by teachers themselves. Over the two years, the teacher collected materials for lectures and then adapted them for the students. The final product was a series of worksheets for use in class. Visuals are powerful tools in short lectures in CBI and how to illustrate the main points of the lecture with photographs from newspapers, maps and charts was challenging for the teacher. During the process of constantly refining the material for the course, the teacher realized after the first semester that a more structured approach to the lectures, a unifying theme and recycling of content and vocabulary was necessary and that the students might respond positively to more explicit teaching of academic skills in the course.

Academic skills

Listening to short lectures and oral interaction have been important elements of this CBI program since its inception. Both are challenging for freshmen, many of whom are encountering this approach to second language learning for the first time. Repetition of chosen elements in the theme-based course helped to create confidence and a sense of achievement. Table 2 shows the activities repeated every week in the theme-based course.

Table 2. Repetitive elements and academic skills

Activity	Receptive skills	Productive skills
Warm-up	Reading	Speaking
Lecture	Listening for gist/ detail	Note-taking, summary
Post-lecture questions	Reading	Speaking
Quizzes	Listening for gist/ detail	
Action logs		Summary, writing up notes
Information exchange	Reading,	Summary, speaking

Many students made positive comments about the research for the Information Exchange every week. One student wrote in her final self-evaluation and recommendations for the course, “I loved doing researches about Africa. And I think doing research is very good way to inspire students learning something. Therefore please keep giving students homework like researching something.”

Theme-based courses enable teachers to carry out research, give lectures in English, create their own materials and enjoy the fruits of their students’ own researches. Some theme-based course teachers find the preparation of materials and reading their students’ action logs a burden given the time constraints they are often working under. Perhaps, as result of being able to work in her own language, the NS teacher did not consider these too much of a burden. Moreover, firsthand experience of different lecture styles in English facilitated the development of lectures that stressed important information and answered the warm-up and comprehension questions.

However, it is very difficult to teach academic skills during a six-week course, especially when students are trying to work with unfamiliar content. After the first year, it was apparent that, even after streaming according to a test at the beginning of the academic year, the students varied greatly in their listening and speaking skills. Some students were too shy to speak in English, others found the lectures difficult and were reluctant to take notes and many students downloaded information from the Internet and then found it too difficult to use. Discussions with the other teacher, helped to identify areas where the two teachers could compensate for one another’s weaknesses and positively work together to create a more motivating CBI course for the students by making better use of each teacher’s strengths and course content.

Strategy-based course

Content

Table 3 shows the schedule of the strategy-based course that the teacher developed for the content of her class by adjusting to students' needs and particular contexts in the university curriculum, and through discussions with the program coordinator and colleagues, including the collaborative teacher. Students used English holistically, as they did in the other classes in the CBI program, for example, listening to a mini lecture and writing an action log. The strategy-based course focused on the instruction of specific language and academic skills (see Table 3). At first, communication skills (particularly, shadowing) were taught, according to a syllabus that a NS English teacher had developed. However, after a year of teaching the course it seemed that there might be different roles for NS and NNS teachers and that NNSs might operate target language more consciously than NSs. Cohen (1998, p. 4) explains that learning strategies "are selected by learners." The NNS teacher began to try to teach her conscious second language (English) behavior that Japanese EFL learners were supposed to consciously acquire. By the second year, a syllabus for study of language learning strategies had been developed, based on her personal foreign language learning and teaching experiences. In the first year (Spring, 2006), some students said that they "could not understand the aim of the class" (translated by the authors). In the second year there was positive feedback on the strategy-based course:

Explanation in the class was easy to understand. I think I could make progress in writing because I wrote comments in every class. (Spring, 2007)

I found new learning strategies. (Fall, 2007)

I thought that I could make progress in English. (Fall, 2007)

It was a very beneficial class. (Fall, 2007)

Thus in a 6-week course, the teacher taught an overview of learning strategies used for each linguistic skill. An important feature of the original course was to identify the skills (e.g., shadowing) and then incorporate other essential elements for Japanese EFL learners in the strategy-based course, but the revised syllabus included more extensive language and academic skills (see Table 3). For example, students learned differences between Japanese and English writing or conversation styles in the class and students engaged in group work so that they were able to exchange their language learning experiences within the group.

Academic skills

The strategy course was able to raise students' awareness of their language learning, but the time constraints of the course meant that students had few opportunities to apply to academic performances, the learning strategies and academic skills they had learned, such as shadowing, overshadowing, skimming, scanning, note-taking, and summarizing. This was very unsatisfying in the strategy-based course.

During discussions with the teacher of the theme-based course (the other author), the NNS teacher noticed that the limited time available for applying the skills learned could be complemented by the theme-based course in the other half of the semester. The teachers had established a

Table 3. Schedule of the strategy-based course

Week	Lecture topic	Target academic skills
Week 1	Introduction, setting goals	
Week 2	Speaking	Rehearsing (preparing for speech), note-taking, oral summarizing
Week 3	Listening	Shadowing, overshadowing, oral summarizing
Week 4	Writing	Listening/reading, note-taking, summary writing
Week 5	Reading and vocabulary	Skimming, scanning
Week 6	Summary, final examination, self-reflection, submission of portfolios	

consensus that compensation for weaknesses in the other class was possible but also that collaboration between the two teachers was very necessary. For example, during a discussion about the students' tendency to download from the Internet and incorporate the information in its original form in reports, the NNS teacher realized the importance of educating the students about plagiarism, resulting in more emphasis on plagiarism when writing was taught (Week 4) by asking the students to write the source of the information they received in the task, which was to choose an article from a newspaper or the Internet and write a summary. In the first year, there was some negative feedback on the CBI classes; for example, "I wanted to make the content of the course more profound" (Fall, 2006) and "The both courses

were beneficial, but I could not understand the purpose of the course very well" (Fall, 2006). However, by the second year, there was more positive feedback from students; for example, "It was good to increase opportunities to speak English" (Spring, 2007) and "It was hard to do everything in English, but I think it was a good experience" (Fall 2007).

Feedback about comprehension in the NNS speaker's class was positive but some students still did not understand by saying, for example, "I sometimes could not understand what the teacher said very well" (Fall, 2006) and "I could not understand the teacher a little" (Fall, 2007). This is an issue for further investigation into the NNS use of English as a medium of instruction in a strategy-based course. The results of previous studies have suggested that it is easier for foreign language learners with the same first language to comprehend one another than unfamiliar accents of English (Tauroza & Luk, 1997) or even native speakers' English (Smith & Bisazza, 1982).

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

This paper has described how two teachers refined their approach to CBI over a two-year period through collaborative discussions and adjustments to students' academic needs at university in a foreign language context. The combination of theme-based and strategy-based courses showed how they could complement one another to create a richer teaching environment. This important finding requires more research, especially for courses teaching academic skills to freshmen.

As the teachers' experiences show, teaching CBI courses requires an inordinate amount of time for course design, materials development and, in this case, portfolio evaluation. There is a real danger of teacher burnout given the heavy teaching schedules many teachers have and also there is often no remuneration for the considerable amount of time teachers have to spend. This paper suggests that more collaboration between CBI teachers may alleviate the teacher burden. This combination of theme-based and strategy-based CBI may be one model for achieving less onerous teaching loads. The NS/NNS teacher collaboration may also be significant but this paper has not clearly identified what factors made the collaboration successful. Therefore, there is a need for systematic research into what factors facilitate and inhibit collaboration between teachers.

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